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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Laura DeLorenzo Denison entitled "Elements of Postfeminism: The Current Landscape of American Politics?." I have examined the final electronic copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in Political Science.

Robert Gorman, Major Professor

We have read this dissertation and recommend its acceptance:

Anthony Nownes, Patricia Freeland, Dwight Teeter

Accepted for the Council:

Carolyn R. Hodges

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

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**Elements of Postfeminism:
The Current Landscape of American Politics?**

A Dissertation
Presented for the
Doctor of Philosophy
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Laura DeLorenzo Denison
December 2007

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Laura DeLorenzo Denison

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to
my husband David
and to our girls
Zoe, Hannah, Ariel, Esther and Noah

Acknowledgments

I am grateful to my major professor Dr. Bob Gorman who stuck with me through this project for its duration of several years. Your constant support and encouragement were often the boost I needed to keep going while your shared joy at my circuitous “mommy route” has forever endeared you to me. You are a true friend and mentor.

I am grateful as well to the rest of my committee, Dr. Tony Nownes, Dr. Pat Freeland and Dr. Dwight Teeter who have also hung on through what could possibly be a record-setting slow dissertation process. I appreciate more than I can say your flexibility, your advice and your support.

To my dear friends who listened with what I am sure was at times feigned interest as I recited my newest feminist discovery or postfeminist implication, I must extend my hearty thanks. I want to thank as well my amazing family, my grandparents Bob and Ann Schuckert, my grandmother Juanita DeLorenzo, and my in-laws Bob and Betty Denison who never doubted for a minute that I would actually get this project done and never stopped praying that this would be so. To my sister Sarah, who read the entire dissertation in order to give me feedback and a practice defense, I owe a great number of home cooked meals or something of similar value.

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Abstract

The purpose of this dissertation is to establish the meaning and definition of postfeminism along with an assessment of whether it accurately represents the current era of thinking. It is an historical, descriptive, qualitative analysis of the feminist movement from its inception with the central focus on the newest strand of feminist thought, postfeminism. The progression toward these conclusions entails an outlining of the waves of feminism and the strands of thought within these eras as well as a discussion of third wave feminism, modern feminism and generational differences between the waves. The focus on postfeminism begins with an exploration of the meaning of “post” as well as a look at postfeminism’s strong ties to popular culture and the theoretical underpinnings of this concept. The postfeminist issues of victimhood, work, femininity, sexuality, marriage, men, family and generational collaboration are reviewed in order to determine the definition of postfeminism, assess whether the current era is postfeminist, consider if postfeminism is anti-feminism and measure postfeminism as it relates to the third wave. Finally, the implications of postfeminism and a review of its politics conclude the project.

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Introduction: The Question of Postfeminism

Introduction

Feminism in its varying forms is a topic and movement that has profoundly influenced American society and politics for more than a century. What is most interesting about this, however, is not the longevity of its tenets, but rather the constantly changing nature and face of feminism itself. There is not a comprehensive definition for the term partly because of varied meanings but also because such a venture has been avoided. Nonetheless, feminism in the twentieth century has given way to discussions of postfeminism for many different reasons. It is the intent of this dissertation to discuss and trace feminism in broad terms to assess and make sense of the elusive and confusing references to postfeminism which dot an ever-increasing volume of feminist literature. It is necessary to discuss the eras of feminism to assess whether there is indeed a new era and whether this era is postfeminist.

Feminism as a movement has seemingly ‘stalled’ in recent decades in that it appears to be neither widely recognized nor relevant to the average American woman.¹ While American women enjoy many of the hard-won victories of feminism such as improved wages and hiring practices, there is arguably little now that appeals widely to women who are busy climbing corporate ladders or raising families or both. In addition, the term postfeminism, which was originally invented by pop culture media, has now begun to creep into feminist literature with none too hearty an acceptance. The most interesting aspect of this emergence is that it appears to be unaccompanied by self-proclaimed postfeminist writers. The vague, confusing and at times contradicting uses of

¹ This is evidenced by several indicators which will be discussed at a later point. A striking example is the existence of a “no,...but” feminism which will also be discussed in later chapters.

the term postfeminism in pop culture melded with its sketchy introduction into academia has further ensured that postfeminism remains undefined even to those who reference it. It is this gaping hole in feminist thought that this dissertation seeks to fill. The study of postfeminism is vital to an understanding of the modern American political landscape yet it is not without roadblocks not only because of the difficulty in definition, but also because of the heated conversation currently surrounding the idea.

This dissertation will be an historical, descriptive, qualitative analysis of the feminist movement from its inception with the inclusion of the splits typical of social movements. However, the central focus is on the newest strand of feminist thought, postfeminism. Literature on postfeminism itself is limited because while this term is used with increased frequency by media, and occasionally peppers feminist academia, it is never with the inclusion of a definition or any depth of discussion. It is necessary then, to offer a descriptive and qualitative analysis in an area that has yet to be explored as an aspect of serious academic study.

Postfeminism is an essential study to the area of not only political thought, but also American politics because it is in essence a continuation of the study of women. Feminist studies have been beneficial in bringing attention to issues that concern and affect women, and postfeminism is no different. It is imperative not only for political thought but also to American politics that academia, and particularly political science, obtain an understanding of modern American women. This is not simply because women have and will continue to determine elections, or because women constitute roughly half the population and are therefore rather integral to the operation and function of society, but because if the study of women is to be ongoing and accomplish the equality which is

essential to freedom, it must contain room for new thoughts and theories about the condition and concerns of women. It is the aim of this dissertation to provide an explanation and assessment of the fleeting but heated references to postfeminism in order to provide a framework for understanding our current political culture as it relates to women and men as well as families.

Study Framework

The first step in this endeavor is to discuss the definition of feminism and the inherent difficulty of defining such a term. Obviously, a basic definition of feminism would describe an effort to attain equality for women. However, the ease of a cohesive definition ends there, as any addition in any direction begins to exclude someone. What, exactly is equality? How are women to attain such a condition? Why is it imperative that they do so? One hundred people would answer these questions in 100 different ways, and herein lays the difficulty of feminism. However, there has been such a massive addition to feminist literature in the past 40 years that it is now possible to at least trace the timeline of feminism and recognize the existence of overarching schools of thought.

Chapter 1 includes a timeline of feminism to provide a basis for understanding where postfeminism came from and why it exists. Feminism, like most social movements, started cohesively and quickly branched into a myriad of varying degrees of identification. While many of these branches, which will be called strands for the present purpose, grew to differ quite notably from one another, there were still enough similarities to allow feminists to embrace at least the existence of these differing viewpoints. However, postfeminism and often even the accompanying third wave have been greeted with intense hostility and indignation from most feminist camps. Outlining

the history of feminism will help to determine why postfeminism is often dismissed and whether this dismissal is insightful or merely reactionary.

Within the timeline of feminism will be a discussion of the eras or waves of feminism. There is virtually no disagreement about the existence of the first and second waves, and even the inception of the second wave is commonly accepted. However, the fact that there is discrepancy about the start and existence of a third wave is directly related to postfeminism. The dispute surrounding the third wave is important not only because it highlights the somewhat tumultuous state of feminism, but also because it is unknown whether the third wave and postfeminism are merely contemporary but distinct worldviews or if they are variations of the same viewpoint.

Finally, within the historical look at feminism will be an examination of the strands of feminist thought. Since the ideologies encompassed within feminism are numerous and varied, this portion of the research is an attempt to make a study of postfeminism as it relates to feminism possible. Decades of feminist literature and study have yielded countless writings that can nonetheless be integrated into nine basic philosophies of feminism. These include liberal, radical, socialist, Marxist, cultural, lesbian, black, postmodern, and ecofeminist.² Each will be discussed briefly in order to establish a common theme upon which to examine postfeminism. The classifications are those used by Penny Weiss in her *Conversation With Feminism: Political Theory and Practice*³ and they will be used here because they effectively encompass and divide the vast amount of feminist literature. Each of the nine strands represents an established

² Penny Weiss, *Conversation With Feminism: Political Theory and Practice* (Rowland & Littlefield Publishers Inc: Lanham, MA, 1998), 29.

³ *ibid.*

school of feminist thought and a solid collection of literature that will aid in creating the building blocks of postfeminism.

The purpose of most political thought is to reach an ideal of justice. What constitutes a just society? Each strand of feminism is no different in that it attempts to answer this question in relation to women. Postfeminism in turn has its own answer, and establishing this commonality between each strand of feminism will aid in an understanding of postfeminism and its tenets.

The discussion of historical feminism inevitably leads to a look at modern feminism in Chapter 2 and the quandary of what form and shape feminism has taken with the close of the twentieth century. It will be necessary here to examine with concision what modern feminist writers are saying about the condition of modern feminism. Where is it headed in the twenty-first century and what and who are setting its course? These questions inevitably lead to a deeper examination of the third wave, its proponents, and its tenets. For some feminists, namely younger ones, the third wave is the vehicle which will carry feminism into the present or rather keep it relevant in the new millennium. For others, the third wave is simply another distraction from the real work of feminism. It detracts attention from the issues facing women only to further fragment the once tight cohesiveness of the second wave. These disagreements and other problems presented by modern feminism will be examined because they serve to establish relevance for the postfeminist dialogue.

Postfeminism, as the topic of this dissertation, will be the focus of the remainder of the study. As with feminism, the first step in any discussion of postfeminism must begin with the establishment of existing definitions and this will be done in Chapter 3. In

this case, it is necessary to define the ‘post’ of postfeminism. The advent of the term postfeminism and its debut in popular culture and media will be discussed in order to then turn attention to its more recent appearance in academia. The theoretical underpinnings of postfeminism, although sparse, are also essential to understanding the scope of this concept as well as its implications for society.

The issues surrounding postfeminism are similar to those surrounding feminism and each of its strands. The age-old ‘woman’ question resurfaces in a number of different themes. Victims and reality, work and equality, femininity and masculinity, sexuality and equality, marriage, men and family and generations and collaboration all take prominent positions in the realm of postfeminism and will be examined as part of this study in Chapter 4. In addition to the issues of postfeminism there is the reality of this concept and this will be the focus of Chapter 5. Such issues can only be explored so long before the question inevitably presents itself. What, exactly, is postfeminism? What is the reality of such an era if indeed this is currently where American feminism and American politics stand? Is postfeminism simply anti-feminism? Is it part of the third wave? Or is it a stand-alone addition to feminist theory? These are all vital questions that this dissertation will seek to answer as it frames postfeminism.

Finally, after defining and categorizing postfeminism it is important to assess its cultural and political implications. This will be done in Chapter 6. Any concept or theory entering popular culture and academia with the elusive yet captivating nature of postfeminism is certain to have far reaching repercussions on many facets of society. The social, political, and relational implications of this movement are worth investigating because they have the potential to transform American culture and consequently its

politics. Finally, the politics of postfeminism will be discussed and compared with the politics of previous waves of feminism.

Why Postfeminism?

The whole concept of postfeminism came to me quite unexpectedly as I drove home for fall break several years ago. A friend read an article that mentioned postfeminism briefly at the end of a statement as if it were a common topic. My curiosity was immediately piqued because neither of us had any idea what it meant. As I began to look into the idea of postfeminism I realized that my curiosity was not unwarranted. This 'postfeminist' world was fraught with heated debate, ambiguity, and contradiction; I was hooked. It was also at this point that I started to realize my intense interest in women's issues but not this as much as the 'mystique' of women (to borrow a well used feminist phrase). Women are fascinating and I remember watching movies as a little girl and being immediately more attentive when a female was in a scene. Everything about them was interesting they dressed, acted and talked so differently from men, and their behaviors and responses were intriguing. If postfeminism was a possible trend in the collective mindset of women then I determined to uncover what it entailed.

I suppose what really spurred me toward this project is the fact that I like being a woman. This was not always the case, mind you, because at some point in my teen years I decided that being a female was second-rate and more of an annoyance than anything. I am not sure exactly why I felt this way, because this was never the message I received as a child, nor was it one articulated by anyone in my family. Nonetheless, fueled by the Alanis Morissettes of the day, I was convinced that somehow I had missed out by being female. I am not sure exactly when all this began to change but it has been a gradual

process that has culminated with this project and the purchase of the first pink item I have ever owned. I suppose I am a plausible candidate for postfeminist rhetoric if such a thing even exists because I seem to fit better in messiness. I live a life of seeming contradictions but feel none of the anomie that would logically come from such an existence. I love being married, I love staying at home with my children, and I enjoy having a part-time stake in the professional world. I feel I have lost nothing in this transaction except perhaps the frequent chance to wear professional clothing and my new pink shirt. And yet, insinuations that my chosen occupation is wasteful or informed by a larger scheme to keep me subverted are bizarre and I find it difficult to engage in such discussions with any earnestness.

At the same time, the fact that the equality of men and women is apparently a necessary discussion is stunning to me because I cannot believe that these obvious equalities are questioned. I suppose it is naivety that causes me to be shocked at prejudice against women and to be further mystified that differences between men and women are taken as inequality. Nonetheless, I am grateful to live in the era I do. I cannot fathom women not being able to vote, or lease an apartment, or enter certain professions, or keep a job during pregnancy. The fact that some of these deplorable conditions existed just decades ago is truly baffling. And yet, we have not arrived at a tranquil time in history for women, or anyone for that matter. And so, I embark on this writing expedition in the hopes that my discoveries will reveal something useful in the progression toward true equality for women. I hope that my daughters will grow up always knowing their worth and value as women and be able to forge even newer and wilder frontiers of equality than I have been privileged to encounter. They do, after all, deserve it.

Chapter 1: The Timeline of Feminism

Defining Feminism

Feminist theorists have been hesitant to define feminism for fear of binding it to a narrow and exclusive dictate of who is and is not a feminist. However, this has led to significant confusion in the feminist camp, as starkly opposing theorists argue under the “feminist” banner.⁴ Feminism in essence has become a catchall phrase for a varied collection of projects, both social and theoretical, driven by a concern for the status and condition of women. Feminists complain that in recent years feminism has lost what was once thought to be a collective “we” mentality expressed in a cohesive definition and project.⁵ Feminism has therefore come to be defined as everything from simply a fight for equal status among women to “a struggle against male supremacy and the struggle for a human status for women identifying with women.”⁶ Most simply put, feminism is the “intellectual-political” effort made since the beginning of the second wave on behalf of women.⁷

The difficulty in definition arises when the descriptive is abandoned for more specific ideals or facets of feminism. Feminism, for many, has come to mean being a woman above all else before being a member of any other group, be it familial, racial, religious, social, political or national.⁸ There is even “good feminism” and “bad feminism” defined by its critical or non-critical stance toward the women’s movement

⁴ Denise Thompson, *Radical Feminism Today* (Sage Publications: London, 2001), 5.

⁵ Misha Kavka, “Introduction,” in Elisabeth Bronfen and Misha Kavk, eds., *Feminist Consequences* (Columbia University Press: New York, 2001), xii.

⁶ Thompson, 14 and 16.

⁷ David Simpson, “Feminisms and Feminizations in the Postmodern,” in Margaret Ferguson and Jennifer Wicke, eds., *Feminism and Postmodernism* (Duke University Press: Durham, 1994), 55.

⁸ Germaine Greer, *The Whole Woman* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999).

and modern feminism.⁹ Regardless of differing definitions, however, feminism holds that women suffer from imbedded social injustices and prejudice because of their gender. As such, feminism has the intention of correcting these inherent social ills in some form or fashion.¹⁰ In essence, “something is a feminist issue if an understanding of it helps one understand the oppression or subordination of women.”¹¹

This naturally leads to the overarching problem of defining feminism to make it relevant to women as a group. While some view the difficulty in defining feminism as resulting from its many strands,¹² others claim that there cannot be plural feminisms because this allows room for completely contradicting and sometimes anti-feminist notions to be placed under the feminist banner.¹³ In this particular view there is one feminism, with some unavoidable internal differences, that must be defined so as to rule out any anti-feminism disguised as yet another feminist viewpoint. A definition, then, provides a solid platform from which to start and continue genuine feminist discussion. Perhaps the best definition of feminism is the simple assertion that “the female half of the human race should enjoy the same rights, and have the same opportunities to fulfill those rights, as the male half.”¹⁴ The difficulty, of course, is what this looks like in reality and

⁹ Deborah L. Siegel, “Reading between the Waves: Feminist Historiography in a ‘Postfeminist’ Moment,” in Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake, eds., *Third Wave Agenda: Being feminist, doing feminism* (University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, 1997), 67.

¹⁰ Imelda Whelehan, *Modern Feminist Thought: From the Second Wave to ‘Post-Feminism’* (Edinburgh University Press: Edinburgh, 1995), 25.

¹¹ Karen J. Warren, “Taking Empirical Data Seriously: An Ecofeminist Philosophical Perspective,” in Karen J. Warren, ed., *Ecofeminism: Women, Culture, Nature* (Indiana University Press: Bloomington, 1997), 4.

¹² *ibid*, 25.

¹³ Thompson, 16.

¹⁴ Karen Lehrman, *The Lipstick Proviso: Women, Sex & Power in the Real World* (Doubleday: New York, 1997), 14.

practice. Feminism is the collective school of thought that attempts to add substance to the ideal of gender equality.

In order to understand the modern feminist dialogue, especially as it pertains to post-feminism, it is necessary to understand, at least broadly, the different strands of feminism. Typically the different feminist theoretical frameworks (strands as they are called here) include liberal, radical, socialist, Marxist, cultural, lesbian, black, postmodern, and ecofeminist.¹⁵ There is also what is known as first, second and now third wave feminism which encompass timeline analysis more than theoretical assessment and appear to have been built one upon the other. Each of these frameworks has developed at different points in history and for different purposes. They frequently overlap in their theoretical underpinnings and as such the major strands will be discussed only briefly in order to obtain an understanding of the platform from which postfeminist thought has been launched.

The First Wave

Feminism in the United States has a timeline structure as it has historically been defined by eras or “waves” of feminism that have swept across society. The first wave comprised a legal struggle for women’s right to vote. This era of feminism is often associated with meetings such as the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention where men and women met in public for the first time to discuss the rights of women. Reform efforts like the progressive movement where women were prominent in the struggle to obtain rights and better working conditions for the under-aged and the impoverished were also a force

¹⁵ Weiss, 29.

in the beginning of feminism. The culmination of this legal battle was the suffrage movement and the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920.

The first wave of feminism was intellectually based on natural rights and colonial notions of equality for the human race.¹⁶ While this was indeed the belief of most first wave movement participants, the greatest focus of women's groups at this time was the vote. Most first wave feminists carefully avoided issues such as marriage, divorce and sexuality because simply asserting the idea of a female vote was controversial enough to occupy the American public.¹⁷ As with each wave of feminism this first phase took place in the middle of a transitional social climate. Post-civil war America looked remarkably different from five years earlier. Along with drastic political changes came a social shift in the lives of women. The "New Woman" emerged as a symbol of the widespread movement of women into educational, political, social and professional spheres where they previously had little if any representation. "As a type, the New Woman was young, well educated, probably a college graduate, independent of spirit, highly competent, and physically strong and fearless."¹⁸ While this generalization describes only a certain type and class of woman during the first wave, it is nonetheless indicative of a new pattern of thought that emerged to allow the birth of a successful suffrage movement.

Even within the legal struggle for the vote there was a progression of feminist thought. The beginning of feminism was defined by an effort to obtain equal rights and it was based on the recognition that natural rights declared equality for all. This struggle for women was so inexorably tied to the concept of equal rights that it was birthed out of the

¹⁶ Jean V. Matthews, *The Rise of The New Woman: The women's movement in America, 1875-1930* (Ivan R. Dee: Chicago, 2003), 67.

¹⁷ *ibid*, 6-7.

¹⁸ *ibid*, 13.

abolition movement.¹⁹ “Republican Motherhood” or the notion of women as moral authorities with the influence of passing the values of liberty and equality to children was a bulwark of women’s rights.²⁰ This view of the female gender mobilized women into action on the basis of moral duty as what started as a moral and scriptural attack against slavery for many women eventually became a call for gender equality as well.

The next phase of feminist thought began in the early 1870s with the onset of the women’s temperance movement. This “feminism of fear” was a back door method of activating women because while many women were hesitant and unsure about participating in efforts to give women equal political standing; they were more than willing to engage in political efforts to protect themselves and their children.²¹ In essence, the motivation behind this phase of feminism was a desire for protection from the abuses of men and alcohol. “Home protection” was a rallying cry and women began joining temperance unions in record numbers as the social and political were joined.²² Many women now saw the vote as a method of ensuring protection of both their families and the moral underpinning for society.

The final stage of feminist thought in the first wave, referred to as the “feminism of personal development” was based on the belief that “because individuals generate ideas and achieve goals, no government or custom should prohibit the exercise of personal freedom.”²³ It was in essence the culmination of thought in the first wave and the most comprehensive step toward liberal feminism, the great political thought

¹⁹ Suzanne M. Marilley, *Woman Suffrage and the Origins of Liberal Feminism in the United States, 1820-1920* (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, 1996), 16.

²⁰ *ibid*, 21.

²¹ *ibid*, 100.

²² *ibid*, 101.

²³ *ibid*, 8.

contribution of the first wave. While this personal development feminism initially professed a great deal of national, racial, and class prejudice it eventually became a bridge that connected groups from black women's clubs and elite feminist thinkers to trade unions and temperance adherents all under the banner of women's suffrage. Each group had differing reasons for supporting this role of women, but the combined force of these alliances was enough to make the suffrage movement national by 1915 and successful by 1920.²⁴

The Second Wave

While seeds of feminism were planted when women entered the workforce en masse during WWII, many of these women returned home at the close of the war. There was no widespread effort to change the condition of women again until the women's movement exploded in the early 1960s. The battle turned here from a legal effort to a social one as women sought equal social standing and recognition. Betty Friedan's 1963 book *The Feminist Mystique*²⁵ was particularly vital to this shift as was President John F. Kennedy's Commission on the Status of Women and the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibited discrimination on the basis of sex as well as race.²⁶ This second wave is the most notable era of feminism, as most of the strands common to feminism as well as the theories of women's condition inherent in these strands developed during this time period. On a large scale women publicly started noting the poor condition of their lives and theorizing about causes and possible remedies. The

²⁴ *ibid*, 188.

²⁵ Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, (Dell: New York, 1974). See *The Feminist Mystique* for discussions on the cult nature of motherhood in the 1950s which gave rise to the second wave of feminism.

²⁶ Karen O'Connor and Larry J. Sabato, *American Government: Continuity and Change; Alternate 2000 Edition* (Longman: New York, 2001), 195. It is interesting to note that the provision that added "sex" to the 1964 Civil Rights Act was included as a joke by Southern Democrats who hoped such nonsense would prohibit the passage of the bill altogether.

second wave embodied the two focuses of “women as an oppressed social group” and “the female body with its need for sexual autonomy as a primary site of that oppression.”²⁷ The second wave was a political movement that sought to unite women through a shared oppression. However, because of the vast differences in thought and expression within the movement this period was as much a search for an encompassing theory as it was an active struggle for equality.²⁸

The Third Wave

The second wave lasted until the late 1980s or early 1990s when some claim it was replaced by the third wave, which attempts to make feminism applicable to women’s lives and ensure that the changed and changing role of women is noted.²⁹ It is difficult to pinpoint the inception of feminism’s third wave because of the disagreements as to whether such a thing even exists. However, the 1991 Clarence Thomas-Anita Hill hearings are often cited as the beginning of the third wave because of the flurry of feminist activity and gender issue awareness that followed for several years thereafter. It is thought that “something critical to the sustenance of patriarchy died in the confrontation and something new was born.”³⁰ The third wave is the focus here because not only is its very existence debated, but after answering this question it is then necessary to determine its role in postfeminism. To truly explore the third wave, it must be deciphered whether the phenomenon of postfeminism *is* the third wave, a strand of the third wave, or simply anti-feminism cloaked as something more.

²⁷ Thornham, *The Routledge Critical Dictionary of Feminism and Postfeminism*, ed., Sarah Gamble (Routledge: New York, 2000), 31.

²⁸ *ibid*, 33.

²⁹ The 3rd WWWave, “Welcome to the 3rd WWWave!” <http://www.io.com/~wwwwave/>.

³⁰ Naomi Wolf, *Fire with Fire: The New Power Feminism and How to Use It* (Random House: New York, 1994), 5.

The Strands of Feminism

Within the timeline of the waves of feminism, the feminist movement itself has broken into many different “strands” or schools of thought. Each of these begin an assessment of the plight of women from very different premises and often come to very different conclusions as to what can and should be done to correct inequality. They each define a just society uniquely and then promote an agenda for the achievement of such a society. There are innumerable names for the strands of feminism, but the ones discussed here sufficiently cover the main differences within feminism. It is these differences and the progression of the thought and theory behind them that form the foundation of postfeminism.

Liberal Feminism

While most of the strands fall within the second wave of feminism, liberal feminism has its roots in the first wave and the progressive and suffrage movements. It is one of the oldest strands of feminism and shares its roots with natural rights philosophers such as John Locke. Liberalism independently, however, only granted such natural rights to men and therefore gave rise to liberal feminism whose “chief aim” was to achieve for women the natural rights inherently endowed to only the males of humankind. While liberalism is based upon the writings of liberal theorists who asserted equality and the primacy of the individual, and while these theories were never directly targeted at discrepancies in the treatment of women, liberal thought nonetheless became the

theoretical groundwork for liberal feminism because carried to its natural conclusion liberalism leads to equality of the sexes.³¹

Liberal feminism, although based in classical liberal thought, is subtle and difficult to analyze because there is no concrete and central writing on it. While much of the feminist writing in our society could be classified as liberal feminism it is not labeled as such. Even self-proclaimed liberal feminist writers tend to avoid any explicit reliance on a specific political viewpoint. It is difficult to pin down liberal feminist thought, but the centrality of the individual in traditional liberal thought is also evident and central in liberal feminist thought.³² The liberal feminist definition of a just society, then, is one of equality for the individual regardless of gender. A just society is one created through equality of opportunity while the parity of position which such opportunity creates is the pathway to justice.

Liberal feminism blames the oppression of women on sex discrimination. Women do not gain easy entry to the fields of law, business and medicine for no other reason than the lack of opportunity. Therefore, simply changing the position of women from the private domestic world to the public world would correct for missed opportunities and eliminate discrimination.³³ Women are relegated to the private or domestic sphere where the world consists of household duties such as childcare and housework. The problem with housework according to liberal feminism is that while it is necessary, it is also unpaid and therefore without value because it fails to contribute to the marketplace. This

³¹ Arlene W. Saxonhouse, *Women in the History of Political Thought: Ancient Greece to Machiavelli* (Praeger: New York, 1985), 6.

³² Susan Brown, *The Politics of Individualism: Liberalism, Liberal Feminism and Anarchism* (Black Rose Books: Montreal, 2003), 62.

³³ James W. Messerschmidt, *Capitalism, Patriarchy, And Crime: Toward a Socialist Feminist Criminology* (Rowman & Littlefield: New Jersey, 1986), 26.

is ironic for liberal feminism because if something is valued by an individual, it should be considered valuable even if it fails to contribute to the marketplace in a traditional manner.³⁴

The problem then becomes that something with value (in this case housework) invariably leads to exploitation and a hindering of freedom, which is also opposed by liberal thought. In order to eliminate this dilemma, exchanges would have to be made according to necessity rather than profit. And, unfortunately, this is naturally impossible in the marketplace which is the reality of the public realm. In turn, it is the public realm where liberal feminists insist women will find freedom and equality if only they are allowed entrance.³⁵ In essence, “Liberal feminism works so long as its devaluation of the private sphere is acceptable to women, so long as women view their problem as restriction or confinement which can be overcome by transcendence, by entering the public realm on the same terms as men.”³⁶

Rationality is another central tenet of liberal thought that is central to liberal feminism. This rationality is based on the notion that liberal views of morality require the liberation of women and that the oversight of such liberation is corrosive because it defeats any liberal presumptions. The natural conclusion, then, is that logic and reason are far more important than biology³⁷ and that women are human before they are female. Within liberal thought, before the introduction of feminism, women were subjugated to the realm of the irrational and unthinking, and early feminist writers such as Mary

³⁴ Brown, 75.

³⁵ *ibid*, 76.

³⁶ Susan F. Parsons, “Feminism and the Logic of Morality: A consideration of alternatives,” in Sean Sayers and Peter Osborne, eds., *Socialism, Feminism and Philosophy: A Radical Philosophy Reader* (Routledge: London, 1990), 75.

³⁷ *ibid*, 74.

Wollstonecraft (Vindication of The Rights of Woman) argued that not being allowed to use their mental capacities left women in a “gilded cage” in the condition of prisoners.³⁸ The logical conclusion of liberal feminism is that women will be free when they have choices, because “people are free to the extent that they are in control of their own destinies, and not controlled by other people or other alien forces,”³⁹ and once choice is given, those things that are undesirable will eventually disappear.⁴⁰ The achievement, then, of a just society, the elimination of gender discrimination lies with the opening of doors. When women are given options they automatically throw off the shackles of oppression and walk in equality with men. This is the essence of liberal feminism.

Liberal feminism was radical at the time it began because it dealt with the practical issues of property, wage earning, citizenship, and voting. While it is generally labeled as the first wave of feminism, liberal feminism is a school of thought that continued into the second wave. Original second wave outrage at the condition of women was based on the liberal reasoning that women were not allowed to be individual, and were not treated as such. They were excluded from anything requiring independence or competition or intellect and were regarded as being the responsible party when such exclusion led to neuroses of all types.⁴¹ This reasoning, although not overtly stated, is based on the liberal foundation of the primacy of the individual.

³⁸ Whelehan, 29.

³⁹ Janet Radcliffe Richards, *The Sceptical Feminist* (Penguin Books: Middlesex, 1980), 89-90.

⁴⁰ *ibid*, 99.

⁴¹ Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*. Friedan refers to the rampant cases of psychological breakdowns and disorders among housewives during the era of the 1950s and early 1960s.

Marxist Feminism

Another strand of feminism that has first wave roots is Marxist feminism. This ideology is unlike liberal feminism in that it does not concentrate on the domestic as women's primary realm but is rather concerned with women as laborers in the market. The focus here is on the marketplace, specifically the economy of the marketplace, and on the impersonal patterns by which economies and cultures evolve. Marxism holds capitalism responsible for the existence of an unfair class system. Marxist feminism similarly holds capitalism responsible for both an unfair class system and the subsequent oppression of women within this system. A Marxist approach to the nature of women does not rely on biological differences as explaining differences in nature because again, while biology goes a long way in determining the social and sexual division of labor, there are still far more influential social and historical factors.⁴² In other words, women are an oppressed population within an oppressive class society for more reasons than being female. "The Marxist view then is that the different generalizations true of men and women can be explained by the sexual division of labor institutionalized into sets of practices and social and cultural institutions and that this in turn can be subsumed under a theory explaining the sexual/social division of labor."⁴³

Marxist feminism was invigorated during the second wave of feminism in the 1960s and demanded a revamping or rethinking of the parts of Marxist theory that ran contrary to the feminist slogan "the personal is political." In other words, since women were relegated to the private sphere under capitalism, a Marxism that concentrated only

⁴² Nancy Holmstrom, "Women's Nature," in Cass R. Sunstein, ed., *Feminism and Political Theory* (The University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1990), 79.

⁴³ *ibid*, 78.

on the public issues of politics and economics became unacceptable. Marxist theory was transformed by feminists who among other things insisted that production include gender relations in addition to class relations.⁴⁴ The object of Marxist feminism is “to identify the operation of gender relations as and where they may be distinct from, or connected with, the processes of production and reproduction understood by historical materialism.”⁴⁵ In essence, the historical mode of production as it relates to the household, the domestic, and the sexual must be examined in order to identify the entry and continuance of gendered exploitation.

While the relationship between capitalism and the subjection of women is central, it is necessary for Marxist feminism to incorporate a look into gender divisions even as they existed before the onset of capitalism and the new and greater oppressions found therein.⁴⁶ The existence of a “sex-gender system” is a vital component of Marxist feminism because it brings to light the fact that while exploitation and class divisions define the public realm, gender divisions or male domination and exploitation of women define the private realm. To begin to address this condition with Marxist theory, the “mode of production” so consequential in Marxism must include the labor of the domestic sphere as well as the labor of the public.⁴⁷

In fact, patriarchy (or the oppression of women by men) and capitalism are virtually inseparable to the Marxist feminist because of the structure of the traditional family. Indeed, “isolated families breed individualism and competitiveness. Male

⁴⁴ Roger S. Gottlieb, *History and Subjectivity: The Transformation of Marxist Theory* (Temple University Press: Philadelphia, 1987), 124.

⁴⁵ Michele Barrett, *Women’s Oppression Today: Problems of Marxist Feminist Analysis* (NLB; Verso Editions: London, 1980), 9.

⁴⁶ *ibid.*

⁴⁷ Gottlieb, 128.

domination in a family hierarchy supports acceptance of authoritarianism in society at large. The sexual division of labor contributes to the creation of a divided and politically weak working class.”⁴⁸ This oppressive social structure is referred to as “the capitalist family” because its stark division of labor distinguishes sharply between the paid and the domestic. In turn, this labor is sexually segregated with men doing the paid labor and women doing the unpaid and lowly domestic labor. Before capitalism there was little reliance on a wage system and labor could therefore scarcely be divided as such.⁴⁹ But, from the beginning, class society has been characterized by inequality of the sexes. In fact, “this domination has been upheld and perpetuated by the system of private property, the state, the church and the form of the family that served man’s interests.”⁵⁰ The inequality of women is natural in a capitalist society that promotes injustice and discrimination at every level.⁵¹

Marxist feminists take issue with the Marxist contention that labor unpaid is labor ignored and discounted or “unproductive” because this naturally nullifies entirely that labor which is procreative or domestic in nature. While women should not be bound to the domestic, such work needs to be included as an aspect of production and unequal division in the labor force itself need to be addressed.⁵² The problem with Marxist feminism, according to its critics, is the irreconcilable difference between women as a group and the class basis of Marxist theory. Women cannot be their own class because

⁴⁸ *ibid*, 131.

⁴⁹ *ibid*, 129.

⁵⁰ Evelyn Reed, *Problems of Women’s Liberation: A Marxist Approach* (New York: Path-finder Press, Inc., 1971), 29.

⁵¹ *ibid*.

⁵² Whelehan, 45.

this would introduce divisiveness into the political framework.⁵³ Marxist feminism, although recognizing the role of men, even working class men in the subjection of women, also advocates and recognizes the need for the inclusion of men if women's liberation is ever to truly occur. This is especially true since such freedom cannot be achieved within the confines of capitalism.⁵⁴ To Marxist feminists, capitalism and the oppression of women in a patriarchal society are inseparable and it is only by joining a socialist revolution that true freedom for women can be realized.⁵⁵

A just society for Marxist feminism is one where the means of production is equally distributed because the purse strings are the key to oppression. To the Marxist feminist, women's liberation is a part of larger objective forces that lead to a socialist revolution in order to guarantee true freedom for men and women. This branch of feminism recognizes the need for a combined effort to overthrow the oppressive chains that bind many groups from the working class male to the African-American. The Marxist slogan "we have nothing to lose but our chains; we have a world to win" is particularly apropos when applied to the women's movement inside Marxism.⁵⁶

Socialist Feminism

A similar strand of feminism called socialist feminism is rooted in Marxist theory as well, but it differs slightly from Marxist feminism. Socialist feminism is inexorably linked to Marxist feminism and is in fact virtually the same in a myriad of respects but views itself as stepping in where other feminisms end. Consciousness-raising, a goal of Marxist feminism, while extremely important to any type of women's movement, was

⁵³ *ibid*, 63.

⁵⁴ Barrett, *Women's Oppression Today*, 258.

⁵⁵ Reed, 9.

⁵⁶ *ibid*, 63.

soon recognized as lacking. It is one thing to help thousands of women become aware of their second class subjective status but quite another to start revolutionizing the institutions of society in order to change this status. For the socialist feminist there is no materialist inevitability to liberty. Raising women's consciousness is the beginning rather than the end. Socialist feminism raises consciousness about many questions including the origin of oppression and male supremacy and then offers a solution in the form of a self-conscious, practical movement that aims to transform capitalist society.⁵⁷

“Social feminists synthesize some aspects of radical feminism and Marxism into a theory that gives priority to neither production nor reproduction, but views them as equal, interacting and co-reproducing each other.”⁵⁸ The two concepts of production and reproduction are inseparable in that it is impossible to understand one without understanding the effect each has upon the other. In contemporary society, production in the traditional Marxist sense of the creation of desired goods is regulated by capitalism and the class relations therein while reproduction or the need to procreate, experience intimacy, and otherwise carry out daily life is regulated by patriarchy. This is why socialist feminism concentrates equally on the two oppressive mechanisms rather than just one or the other.⁵⁹ Socialist feminism is based in the notion that the oppression of women lies in a material root and from this it has expanded to answer “the woman

⁵⁷ Mary-Alice Waters, “Are Feminism and Socialism Related?” in Linda Jenness, ed., *Feminism and Socialism* (Pathfinder Press: New York, 1972), 20. See also in the same text Kipp Dawson's article “A Revolutionary Perspective on the Oppression of Women” which underlines the same issues.

⁵⁸ Messerschmidt, 27.

⁵⁹ *ibid*, 28.

question” by focusing on numerous aspects of women’s existence, namely the family, work, and equality, all of which are based in part on traditional Marxist thought.⁶⁰

A just society for the socialist feminist is one that rests on a foundation of equal opportunity. Economics are the focus of oppression although patriarchy and capitalism are inseparable. The focus of freedom for women must lie in the transformation of society on many levels. When socialists refer to a revolution they are referring to the complete demolition of class society and private property because these are considered to be the tools of oppression not only for the working class male, but for all women. A true socialist revolution would mean a number of freeing things for women including free 24-hour childcare, socially organized household duties such as cooking, cleaning, and laundry, free medical care, and free education. In other words, it would be a leveling of the playing field so that society and not the individual become central and women are therefore permitted to excel in whatever occupation they choose.⁶¹ While this is similar to the liberal feminist claim that women need entry into society in order to obtain equality, the difference is that socialist feminism views society as first needing a transformation.⁶²

Those who cannot “produce” in the traditional sense; children, the elderly, the disabled, are of no value to a capitalist society. Women are oppressed in such a society because they are domestic slaves, forced to care for the non-productive, thereby ensuring

⁶⁰ Lise Vogel, *Marxism and the Oppression of Women: Toward a Unitary Theory* (Rutgers University Press: New Jersey, 1983), 29-33.

⁶¹ Waters, 22.

⁶² Allison Jagger, *Feminist Politics and Human Nature* (Rowman & Allanheld: New Jersey, 1983), 186-190.

that such a task does not fall to society at large.⁶³ Familial relationships are traps then, and even marriage becomes little more than a “relationship of slavery” with the housewife always on the giving end.⁶⁴ While the oppression of women within the family is not a new concept, the uniting of feminism and socialism over the institution of the family was a development of the early 1970s.⁶⁵ Socialist feminism has a great deal to say about the family and its oppressive patriarchal structure and close ties with class society. In fact, socialist feminists believe that

Just as the family is indispensable to class society, so the suppression of women is indispensable to the maintenance of the family system. If women were freed of responsibility for the care of children, and allowed to enter the productive life of society on an equal footing with men, the family as we know it would cease to exist.⁶⁶

The family is such an odious structure to the socialist feminist because it is seen as primarily an economic institution designed to nurture and care for the current and future generations of workers.⁶⁷ Society at large is believed to be much more capable of handling the needs now met by the family, namely the women in families, and the transition of responsibility would allow women freedom from their current familial oppression. This abolition would also free children because they too experience harmful oppression under the family regime where they are controlled by parents without the

⁶³ Waters, 24.

⁶⁴ Christine Delphy, “The Main Enemy,” *The Main Enemy: A Material Analysis of Women’s Oppression* (Women’s Research and Resources Centre: London, 1977), 15.

⁶⁵ Mary McIntosh, “The Family in Socialist-Feminist Politics,” in Rosalind Brunt and Caroline Rowan, eds., *Feminism, Culture and Politics* (Lawrence and Wishart: London, 1982), 114.

⁶⁶ Waters, 22.

⁶⁷ Peggy Morton, “A Woman’s Work is Never Done,” in Edith Altbach, ed., *From Feminism to Liberation* (Schenkman Publishing Co.: Cambridge, 1971).

benefits of citizenship. This again, is due to the economic rather than emotional ties of the family.⁶⁸

Radical Feminism

Radical feminism was one of the first fruits of the second wave which began as women became disenchanted with both the student and civil rights movements of the 1960s where they were treated more as household help than partners in the struggle for equality. It was both revolutionary and foundational because it challenged many staunchly held societal notions of womanhood while simultaneously becoming a foundation for additional feminisms that thought it did not go far enough or in the right direction. Radical feminism was in a sense a response to the perceived simplicity of liberal feminism that only paved the way for freedom for certain women rather than all women. Radical feminists claim that the root of all social relations is patriarchy.⁶⁹ This differs from Marxist feminism because it claims that patriarchy rather than class exploitation is the dominant feature of history and therefore the primary reason for the state and status of women. It never viewed the working class revolt as a means for the liberation of women.⁷⁰

Instead, the fight for a just society must be against an oppressive patriarchal structure. Patriarchy is defined in a myriad of ways, from men controlling the labor

⁶⁸ Dianne Feeley, "The Family," in Linda Jenness, ed., *Feminism and Socialism* (Pathfinder Press: New York, 1972), 73-77.

⁶⁹ Messerschmidt, 26.

⁷⁰ Gottlieb, 125.

power and sexuality of women,⁷¹ to “an ideology with a self/other distinction” that is “based on a sense of the self that is separate, atomistic.”⁷² It is a dysfunctional system where rules are covert and confusing and never changed because of the emphasis on power. This is opposite of a functional system which is characterized by respect and clear and negotiable rules that govern openly discussed problems.⁷³ In essence, a patriarchal system is defined by men having power simply because they are male.⁷⁴

While radical feminism has no specific doctrine apart from the existence of patriarchy, the sole focus is the oppression of women in every form. Men are seen as the problem and even male supporters are often treated with suspicion.⁷⁵ Furthermore, since oppression is everywhere pervasive in society, all previously accepted and established ways of doing things are in need of reform. The institutions of marriage and family are considered stifling and alternate lifestyles from communal living to lesbianism are embraced. The strict separatism of radical feminism is a response to centuries and generations of patriarchy and female subordination. In this sense all discrimination and mistreatment is focused on the biological role of the woman.⁷⁶ In fact, radical feminism started with the recognition of biology and reproductive ability as the source of women’s oppression. If biology is oppressive then it must be eliminated in the sense of causing any recognizable sex distinctions. In other words, “genital differences between human beings

⁷¹ Messerschmidt, 32.

⁷² Greta Gaard, “Living Interconnections with Animals and Nature,” in Greta Gaard, ed., *Ecofeminism: Women, Animals, Nature* (Temple University Press: Philadelphia, 1993), 2.

⁷³ Karen J. Warren ‘The power and the promise of ecological feminism’, *Environmental Ethics*. Vol. 12, no. 2, 1990, 125.

⁷⁴ Zillah Eisenstein, “Developing a Theory of Capitalist Patriarchy and Socialist Feminism,” in Zillah Eisenstein, ed., *Capitalist Patriarchy and the Case for Socialist Feminism* (Monthly Review Press: New York, 1979), 16.

⁷⁵ Whelehan, 70.

⁷⁶ *ibid*, 74.

would no longer matter culturally.”⁷⁷ On the other hand, a focus of radical feminism is the differences between men and women in order that the concerns of women might be recognized. Women’s oppression came to be seen as unique, distinct and wholly female. Radical groups such as the Redstockings published manifestos stating such beliefs as the fact that

Women are an oppressed class. Our oppression is total, affecting every facet of our lives. We are exploited as sex objects, breeders, domestic servants, and cheap labor...We identify the agents of our oppression as men. Male supremacy is the oldest, most basic form of domination. All other forms of exploitation and oppression (racism, capitalism, imperialism, etc.) are extensions of male supremacy.⁷⁸

The aim of radical feminism is often more wide-ranging than other forms of feminism because it offers practical ways that women can resist oppression. It is less theoretical than either socialist or liberal feminism and has in fact opened debate on many previously “theorized only” subjects such as pornography and lesbianism.⁷⁹ In essence, “radical feminism, perhaps more than any other strand has tried to define feminist politics as a complete way of life, from sharing experiences in consciousness-raising sessions, to living under degrees of separatism in communes and collectives.”⁸⁰ Like all theoretical frameworks, radical feminism has its share of flaws. For instance, the problem with the passionate stance of the radical movement is the exclusion of many women who do not fit the movement’s narrow definition of “enlightened” or “free.” Another problem is the

⁷⁷ Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (Bantam: New York, 1970), 11.

⁷⁸ Robin Morgan, “Redstockings Manifesto,” *Sisterhood is Powerful: An Anthology of Writings from the Women’s Liberation Movement* (Vintage: New York, 1970), 533-534.

⁷⁹ Whelehan, 77.

⁸⁰ *ibid*, 87.

policing nature of radical feminism which strictly dictates the lifestyles of women as well as strict separation of the genders.⁸¹

Black Feminism

Black feminism is a feminist strand resulting from the perceived flaws of radical feminism. It was formed as a result of the failure of the women's liberation movement to address the issues of black women. The movement was perceived by many as being aloof from the masses and therefore unable to address the concerns of black women particularly when it came to childcare, working conditions, abortion and racism. In addition, the male-directed anger present in many radical feminist circles concerned black women who felt that such gender division would be used as a tool to further oppress black men and cause a schism in the black community that would hinder any collective battle against the oppression of the black race.⁸²

Black feminism also arose from social science research on the black family and the mindset that resulted from this scholarship. When it was noted in the 1960s that black communities did not look like the "norm" of American life i.e. two-parent families, completed education, and continuous employment, the government and social scientists declared that the problem lay with the structure of the black family. This "matriarchal" family structure, which was more typically headed by females, was seen as being dominated by black women and a major contributing factor in the "emasculatation" of the black male.⁸³ Black feminism was naturally a response to this as it sought to establish a movement that was sensitive to the unique condition of black women as a doubly

⁸¹ *ibid*, 70.

⁸² Maxine Williams, "Why Women's Liberation Is Important to Black Women," in Linda Jenness, ed., *Feminism and Socialism* (Pathfinder Press: New York, 1972), 47.

⁸³ *ibid*, 40-41.

oppressed group and one able to counter the new attack on black femininity that held it liable for the crisis of black males.

Black feminism recognizes black women in America as being in the “depth of degradation” as the “slave of a slave” and, until feminism, powerless to change this situation.⁸⁴ It is important to note that while the black race has endured the most vile of human atrocities, black women are neither responsible for such treatment nor have they escaped the brutality of the aftermath. While whites oppress blacks, black men are still responsible for their treatment of black women and it is counterproductive to the overarching goal of freedom for black women to be sent back home or otherwise kept weak.⁸⁵ The relationship between black men and women is central to black feminism because of the constant balance between fighting racial oppression *while* fighting patriarchy.

While many younger black women have been found to believe that racism is the problem and sexism is no longer relevant,⁸⁶ there is danger in the idea that successful black struggles require little more than an assertion of male power, particularly if this power is asserted in the traditional patriarchal sense of men as providers and heads of households. While provider is a more benign aspect of patriarchy, other less subtle ways of asserting power such as physical and psychological abuse are very common in black families. The result of course is that black women are still subjugated.⁸⁷ If they are not oppressed because of race, they are oppressed because of gender even among black

⁸⁴ Frances M. Beal, “Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female,” in Timothy P. McCarthy and John McMillan, eds., *The Radical Reader: A Documentary History of the American Radical Tradition* (The New Press: New York, 2003), 442.

⁸⁵ *ibid.*

⁸⁶ bell hooks, *Talking Back: thinking feminist, thinking black* (South End Press: Boston, 1989), 177.

⁸⁷ *ibid.*, 178.

males. A just society for the black feminist is thus twofold. It includes racial and gender equality as these are the simultaneous oppressors of the black female.

As it is with feminism of all types, work is an important concept in black feminism. From a historical perspective the plight of black women and their work is essential to understanding current conditions. Under a system of slavery black women were used as both household labor and field labor which led to the simultaneous stereotypes of the non-gendered work mule of sorts⁸⁸ and the “mammy image.” The latter still persists today in the media but is also reinforced in reality as many black women continue to work as low paid domestic help.⁸⁹ Such “controlling images” as these and more recent ones of “matriarchs, welfare recipients and hot mammas” have led to a perpetuation of oppression as such false images validate the lower positioning of black women and their work.⁹⁰ Feminist scholarship has tended to focus on the paid labor of black women and once again the large concentration of these women in the workforce as low paid domestic help of varying types.⁹¹ While research on unpaid labor is in shorter supply, it has found that black women often view such labor differently than white women, as a resistance to oppression in keeping families together and well nurtured rather than as a patriarchal form of slavery.⁹²

Black feminism has been a strong voice for feminism in feminist circles, but also in black female circles which consider the women’s movement hostile or irrelevant.

Many black women have kept silent about women’s issues because feminists appear to

⁸⁸ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (Routledge: New York, 1990), 43.

⁸⁹ Williams, 42.

⁹⁰ Collins, 67.

⁹¹ Judith Rollins, *Between Women, Domesticity and Their Employers* (Temple University Press: Philadelphia, 1985).

⁹² Collins, 44.

have failed to address their own racist tendencies and demonstrate a superficial understanding of black culture and history.⁹³ This has led to an interesting dynamic of hostility between women and impeded the formation of a cohesive group willing to fight gendered oppression. Black feminism, however, has voiced the need for black women to be visible and involved if the women's movement is to possess the credibility of being representative of all women, including the "authentic black woman."⁹⁴

Lesbian Feminism

While black feminism started as an "outside" voice of women who felt they were not being heard in the mainstream women's movement, other "outside" voices collected in the form of lesbian feminism. Lesbian feminism is an offshoot of radical feminism and is often mentioned in radical feminist discussions. However, lesbian feminism has its own collection of writings, as lesbian feminists have trumpeted certain issues for the first time and brought different perspectives and theories into the women's movement. Now it is not uncommon for feminists from other "schools" to have an obligatory chapter addressing lesbian feminism as it relates to the feminist topic at hand. As with any vein of radical feminism, lesbian feminism focuses a great deal on patriarchy. But, the concentration is on heterosexuality and the domination of women that takes place in such relationships.⁹⁵ Expectations of heterosexuality came to be viewed as confining and dangerous because men view access to women as a natural right.⁹⁶ This danger has come to be referred to as hetero-reality because society operates on the assumption that women

⁹³ Barbara Smith, "The Combahee River Collective Statement," in Timothy P. McCarthy and John McMillan, eds., *The Radical Reader: A Documentary History of the American Radical Tradition* (The New Press: New York, 2003), 452.

⁹⁴ *ibid*, 438.

⁹⁵ Catharine A. MacKinnon, 'Feminism, Marxism, Method and the State: An Agenda for Theory,' *Signs*, vol. 7, no. 3, 1982, 529.

⁹⁶ Adrienne Rich, 'Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,' *Signs*, vol. 5, no. 4, 1980, 643.

exist for men and that women who choose to remain single are loose or somehow otherwise undesirable and therefore the property of any man.⁹⁷

Lesbian feminism builds on the radical feminist notion that women's bodies are a battleground, the primary site of women's oppression, and a "currency of patriarchy."⁹⁸ However, it has chosen to escape these bounds by different means, in essence by choosing to be lesbian, thereby throwing off the chains of the heterosexual institution. Lesbian groups have claimed that lesbianism is a sociopolitical choice based on the desire to not have the personal dominated by patriarchy.⁹⁹ The main goal is the "woman-identified woman" and a lifestyle of refuting male domination even when this domination comes from widely accepted heterosexuality.¹⁰⁰ This resistance is done in several different ways throughout the lesbian feminism movement, from asserting the culpability of all heterosexual women in collaborating with "the enemy"¹⁰¹ to more mediating methods that rely on the term gyn/affection to refer to relationships between women, not necessarily lesbian relationships and the importance of putting women first.¹⁰² Escape from male domination and male constructed concepts of femininity and womanhood (that do not accept lesbianism) requires the formation of a new sense of self, not defined by the constraints of male definitions. Lesbian feminism recognizes that this new self can only

⁹⁷ Janice G. Raymond, *A Passion for Friends: Toward a Philosophy of Female Affection* (The Women's Press: Boston, 1986).

⁹⁸ Robyn Rowland and Renate Klein, "Radical Feminism: History Politics, Action," in Diane Bell and Renate Klein, eds., *Radically Speaking: Feminism Reclaimed* (Spinifex: Australia, 1996), 17.

⁹⁹ Radicalesbians, "The Woman-Identified Woman," in Timothy P. McCarthy and John McMillan, eds., *The Radical Reader: A Documentary History of the American Radical Tradition* (The New Press: New York, 2003), 584.

¹⁰⁰ Charlotte Bunch, "Learning from Lesbian Separatism," in *Passionate Politics: Feminist Theory in Action* (St. Martin's Press: New York, 1987).

¹⁰¹ Leeds Revolutionary Feminist Group, *Love Your Enemy? The Debate Between Heterosexual feminism and Political Lesbianism* (Onlywomen Press: London, 1981).

¹⁰² Janice G. Raymond, *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the Shemale* (Beacon: Boston, 1982).

be defined and created by other women.¹⁰³ In essence, a just society for the lesbian feminist is one where women are free from the bonds of gender patriarchy and able to establish themselves as a gender independent of all preconceived notions of femininity.

Lesbian feminists believe this strand of feminism capable of bridging gaps and successfully addressing problems where no other feminism has been able. One such gap is in the instance of class through “cross-class intimacy.”¹⁰⁴ Because lesbians are immediately aware that they will have to permanently support themselves rather than rely on a breadwinning male, they have the ability to identify with working-class women who have this same reality. The result is an understanding and a bridged gap between middle-class and the working-class women who have often felt otherwise alienated from feminism.¹⁰⁵ Another trail blazed by lesbian feminism is the view of motherhood, which like heterosexuality, was seen for the first time as an institution rather than a relationship. It came to be viewed by many feminists as inescapable bondage, yet another way for male society to keep women dominated. The result of course, was the choice of many women to remain childless and often to become lesbians.¹⁰⁶

Ecofeminism

Ecological feminism or ecofeminism as it is often called, “is the position that there are important connections between how one treats women, people of color, and the underclass on one hand and how one treats the nonhuman natural environment on the

¹⁰³ Karla Jay and Allen Young, “The Woman-Identified Woman (1970),” in Timothy P. McCarthy and John McMillan, eds., *The Radical Reader: A Documentary History of the American Radical Tradition* (The New Press: New York, 2003), 587.

¹⁰⁴ Charlotte Bunch, “Not for Lesbians Only,” *Building Feminist Theory: Essays from Quest, A Feminist Quarterly* (Longman: New York, 1981).

¹⁰⁵ *ibid*, 71.

¹⁰⁶ Robyn Rowland, “Politics of Intimacy: Heterosexuality, Love and Power,” in Diane Bell and Renate Klein, eds., *Radically Speaking: Feminism Reclaimed* (Spinifex: Australia, 1996), 77.

other.”¹⁰⁷ It is vital, then, for ecofeminism to make connections between women and nature and any failure of feminism to do this means that the effort is “grossly inadequate.”¹⁰⁸ Ecofeminist theory views nature as being as important to feminism as race, sex and class because all oppressions reinforce each other and create a vicious cycle.¹⁰⁹ Such views entitle ecofeminism to be seen as a sort of intersection of many crossroads. While it has its roots in a number of feminisms such as Marxist, liberal, radical, black, and cultural, it also introduces a new face to the “isms” of feminism. To classism, racism, sexism, ageism, anti-Semitism, and heterosexism, ecofeminism adds “naturism” or the view that nature is a feminist issue in that it is another key to understanding the subordination of women.¹¹⁰

Ecofeminism draws attention to sexist-naturist language or the notion that women are often described in animal terms such as pets, chicks, foxes, bitches, mother hens, pussycats, hare brains, etc., in a society where animals are seen as inferior to humans, particularly male humans.¹¹¹ This is a process of naturalizing women or equating them with nature and that which is lesser than human. At the same time nature is often feminized in terms like mother nature and domination is reinforced with terms like virgin timber (which is felled) and fallow land (which is barren and therefore useless). This type

¹⁰⁷ Karen J. Warren, “Taking Empirical Data Seriously,” 3.

¹⁰⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ Andy Smith, “Ecofeminism through an Anticolonial Framework,” in Karen J. Warren, ed., *Ecofeminism: Women, Culture, Nature* (Indiana University Press: Bloomington, 1997), 21.

¹¹⁰ Warren, 4.

¹¹¹ *ibid.*, 12. Ecofeminism also has a spiritual element where it combats the subordination of women by reclaiming goddess worship as a means to elevate the value of the feminine. While this is a divisive incorporation to be sure, it is nonetheless a growing aspect of ecofeminism. See Monica Sjoo and Barbara Mor, *The Great Cosmic Mother: rediscovering the religion of the earth* (Harper & Row: San Francisco, 1987), Gloria Feman Orenstein, *The reflowering of the goddess* (Pergamon Press: New York, 1990), and Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow, eds., *Womanspirit rising: a feminist reader in religion* (Harper: San Francisco, 1992).

of language emphasizes the subordinate, inferior, and easily conquered features of nature. Sexist-naturist language thereby creates a subtle cycle in which nature and women are continually subordinated by the use and description of the other.¹¹² Ecofeminism is a call for the end of all oppressions because no liberation from oppression will be complete if not accompanied by the liberation of nature. The ecofeminist believes as well that oppression of any kind is grounded in a system of patriarchy¹¹³ and this is significant because the autonomous male self ideology of patriarchy allows for there to be an “other” category, occupied of course by both women and animals and those who are otherwise dominated and subordinate. Women and animals are connected in the sense that they both occupy a serving function (to serve and to be served up) but ecofeminism recognizes this connection in all its practical forms in modern society as still being constructed rather than natural. It is only after this falsely construed connection is identified that practical and useful theory and action can be taken to correct this injustice.¹¹⁴

While nature and oppression is an obvious theme in ecofeminism children is another focus of this feminism because many children suffer from oppression. Children appear to bear the heaviest burden of environmental irresponsibility, the result of which is everything from unsafe drinking water to toxins that are particularly harmful for children. Once again the exploitation of the environment leads to a subtle subordination and in this case children are subordinate to adults. The perpetuation of domination cycles around to

¹¹² *ibid.* See also Susan Griffin’s “Ecofeminism and Meaning” in the same text for a discussion on the words *woman* and *nature* and how they are inexorably intertwined and thereby relate to ecological processes and the understanding of women’s subordination.

¹¹³ Greta Gaard, “Living Interconnections with Animals and Nature,” in Greta Gaard, ed., *Ecofeminism: Women, Animals, Nature* (Temple University Press: Philadelphia, 1993), 2.

¹¹⁴ Lori Gruen, “Dismantling Oppressions: An Analysis of the Connection Between Women And Animals,” in Greta Gaard, ed., *Ecofeminism: Women, Animals, Nature* (Temple University Press: Philadelphia, 1993), 61.

eventually include not only nature and women and minorities, but eventually children as well.¹¹⁵ A just society for the ecofeminist would thus involve an end to the patriarchy that leads to the abuse of women, nature, minorities and children. The starting point, however, would be the view and treatment of nature by society.

Ecofeminism requires the acceptance of diversity since it is a move to eliminate oppression of all forms. Inherent in the links of ecofeminism is a requirement that moves be made away from individualism and toward a more diversified and collective effort to obtain liberation for oppressed groups. The individual vs. community dilemma of liberal feminism appears once again in ecofeminism as this balance is sought and difference is fused with individuality.¹¹⁶ In a sense this balance is not so difficult for ecofeminists to find because the subservient nurturing role that women have been forced to take over has taught sensitivity and a willingness to strive for preservation. In turn, women have the ability to “move back and forth between seeing the needs of an individual and seeing the needs of a larger community.”¹¹⁷

A pitfall of ecofeminism is its tendency toward reductionism. Ecofeminist theory believes that sexual polarization between men and women is the root of socioeconomic inequality and that this in turn leads to the exploitation of nature. The problem with this is that it leads to the association of exploitative actions with “male” characteristics like aggression, driven-ness and competitiveness while sensitivity to the environment is associated with “female” traits like compassion, nurturing, and sympathy. This reduction

¹¹⁵ Ruthanne Kurth-Schai, “Ecofeminism and Children,” in Karen J. Warren, ed., *Ecofeminism: Women, Culture, Nature* (Indiana University Press: Bloomington, 1997), 193-198.

¹¹⁶ *ibid*, 80-81.

¹¹⁷ Linda Vance, “Ecofeminism and the Politics of Reality,” in Greta Gaard, ed., *Ecofeminism: Women, Animals, Nature* (Temple University Press: Philadelphia, 1993), 139.

presents a problem not only because it is not based on any evidence that males are inherently less sensitive to the preservation of nature while women are inclined toward it, but it also undermines any attempt to understand human traits or those that are common to both men and women. When gender traits are polarized in such a way it solidifies any existing hierarchical structure of domination based on sexuality and in essence produces aggression in a society.¹¹⁸ The biological reductionist tendencies in ecofeminism are also evident in the relationship between nature and femininity. Ecology is often referred to, even by ecofeminists, as the Earth's house or home and the connection is naturally made to the human household, the domain of the woman.¹¹⁹ Ecofeminism has experienced an interesting swing from the celebration of femininity and nature to an intense desire to separate the two¹²⁰ and so, like feminism itself, this strand continues to evolve.

Cultural Feminism

While "cultural studies explore the complex relations between cultural institutions, industries, texts and practices..."¹²¹ cultural feminism claims the existence of a separate woman's culture and experience.¹²² Since cultural studies involve determining how standards and cultural norms are established, cultural feminism investigates how these values have been gendered.¹²³ The study of culture from a feminist perspective has been difficult because of the absence of an applied method. Analyzing the "lived experience" or that which studies living human subjects and invites reflection of this

¹¹⁸ Huey-li Li, "A Cross-Cultural Critique of Ecofeminism," in Greta Gaard, ed., *Ecofeminism: Women, Animals, Nature* (Temple University Press: Philadelphia, 1993), 286-288.

¹¹⁹ Catriona Sandilands, *The Good-Natured Feminist: Ecofeminism and the Quest for Democracy* (University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, 1999), 4.

¹²⁰ *ibid*, 6-7.

¹²¹ Joanne Hollows, *Feminism, femininity and popular culture* (Manchester University Press: Manchester, 2000), 20.

¹²² Sabina Lovibond, 'Feminism and Postmodernism,' *New Left Review* (no. 178, 1989), 27.

¹²³ Hollows, 21.

experience is one suggested remedy to this dilemma. This path toward the rejuvenation of cultural feminism also involves the melding of empirical, ethnographic and experiential methods with anti-essentialism, post-structuralism and psychoanalysis.¹²⁴ In keeping with this feminist cultural study often takes a “bottom-up” approach to study in that it concentrates on “culture readers” or those who operate in real life according to the dictates of cultural messages.¹²⁵

Cultural studies and feminism overlap or have the potential to overlap in three areas, the study of which has been undertaken by theorists in order to more firmly establish the connections between gender issues and cultural dimensions. “Representation and Identity,” the first of these areas, follows the construction of gender identities within the context of cultural institutions such as media. “Science and Technology” is a less established area and one with potential for shared concentration. Its main focus is on reproduction and the role of science and technology in framing the abortion debate. Finally, the area of “Thatcherism and the Enterprise Culture” is a concentrated topic within cultural studies that has given little attention to gender issues. Patriarchy and patriarchal forms during the Thatcher era, leftist politics and the lack of popular appeal, capitalism, and femininity are all focuses of this study.¹²⁶

Feminist cultural studies are a significant area of feminist research because they incorporate historical aspects of social conditions. In essence, this field of study operates

¹²⁴ Angela McRobbie, “The Es and the Anti-Es: New Questions for Feminism and Cultural Studies,” in Marjorie Ferguson and Peter Golding, eds., *Cultural Studies in Question* (Sage Publications: London, 1997), 170.

¹²⁵ Ben Agger, *Gender, Culture, And Power: Toward a Feminist Postmodern Critical Theory* (Praeger: Westport, Connecticut, 1993), 47.

¹²⁶ Sarah Franklin et al., “Introduction to Feminism and cultural studies: pasts, presents, futures,” in Sarah Franklin, Celia Lury and Jackie Stacey, eds., *Off-Centre: Feminism and cultural studies* (Harper Collins Academic: London, 1991), 14-18.

from the assumption that masculine and feminine values and meanings are determined by historical conditions and by doing so adds another dimension to an analysis of femininity. The result is an acknowledgment that “what it meant to be a woman in the 1920s is different to what it meant to be in the 1940s, the 1960s or the 1980s.”¹²⁷ A just society in the eyes of cultural feminists would deconstruct such meanings and replace them with a blank slate that would allow femininity or womanhood to be defined free from preconceived definitions and expectations.

Feminism has divided political culture by politicizing various forms of expression from literature to theatre. Cultural feminism emphasizes the importance of “consciousness, ideology, imagery and symbolism” because these lay the foundation for the socially constructed definitions of femininity, masculinity, the family and most other gendered divisions.¹²⁸ An analysis of popular culture is inevitably involved in any cultural studies and cultural feminism is no different in its methods for exploring the images of women. The first feminist studies in this area concluded that the popular media was strongly sexist and influenced the population, particularly children, to continue in established confining gender roles.¹²⁹ In this manner, the intersection of feminism and cultural studies has legitimized femininity, rescuing it from the relegation of being “inherently worthless, trivial, and politically conservative.”¹³⁰

¹²⁷ Hollows, 34.

¹²⁸ Michele Barrett, “Feminism and the Definition of Cultural Politics,” in Rosiland Brunt and Caroline Rowan, eds., *Feminism, Culture and Politics* (Lawrence and Wishart: London, 1982), 37.

¹²⁹ Hollows, 21.

¹³⁰ *ibid*, 33.

Postmodern Feminism

Postmodern feminism is a bit of a conundrum because its two foundational schools of thought are seemingly impossible bedfellows. Nonetheless, postmodern feminism has developed as a critique of feminist thought and relies on the postmodern rejection of absolutism in word and thought.¹³¹

Postmodernism is associated with a set of questions about the state of knowledge in contemporary society. It poses a challenge both to conventional understandings of the standpoint of the knowing subject (objectivity, neutrality, distance) and the traditional object of knowledge (a separate reality about which the truth can be discovered).¹³²

In other words, postmodernism at its core, advocates “pluralism in morals, politics and epistemology”¹³³ because coherence in humanity is neither a goal nor a possibility and consensus should be neither sought nor admired.¹³⁴

Postmodernism is a response to the Enlightenment’s worship of uniformity of reason. The ideal of the Enlightenment period was to reach a state of “universal reason” which the postmodernist views as outdated and oppressive. It is oppressive in the sense that someone else has defined the ideal in reasoning and existence and may in fact have left large segments of the human populace out of the equation. This is where postmodernism and feminism intersect, as women typically are left out of historical and reasoned equations. In traditional Western philosophy man is portrayed as the ideal of humanity and his struggle is for emancipation from the ignorant and oppressive life he leads in nature. Nature, of course, is portrayed as feminine or everything associated with

¹³¹ Rosemary Putnam Tong, *Feminist Thought: A More Comprehensive Introduction* (Westview Press: Boulder, 1998), 193.

¹³² Franklin et al., 6.

¹³³ Lovibond, 6.

¹³⁴ *ibid.*

femininity (that is home, family, etc.). Postmodern feminism is the attempt to disperse the notion that there is a universal reason because this ideal or the definition of what constitutes this ideal was not created in a vacuum. That is to say, *someone* defined reason and that someone was not female and not likely to have the furtherance of the feminine gender in mind.¹³⁵

The view that women represent nature is a humanist one. This “binary” view puts gender at the place of utmost importance in society and while feminism adheres to this view by also placing reproductive issues such as abortion as central, the postmodern feminist views this as dangerous. Advocating issues based on sex alone even when these arguments appear to be for the immediate betterment of women actually reinforces the sexist binary nature of society. Gender is still central in these arguments and as a result, other important differences are overlooked.¹³⁶ From the postmodern feminist viewpoint, feminism needs to “reconceptualize sex and gender, to see these as dynamic, relational categories-- relational to each other and to other determinants of difference- not as the fundamental basis of the humanist subject.”¹³⁷

Language is arbitrary to the postmodern feminist because all objects and social definitions are constructed by it. As a result, “no universal positions can be put forth because all moral codes depend on sociopolitical contexts.”¹³⁸ This includes some definitions frequently found in other feminist strands. Abortion is a perfect example

¹³⁵ *ibid*, 9-12.

¹³⁶ For a discussion on postmodern feminism and its usefulness in the study of men see ‘Postmodern Feminism and the Critical Study of Men,’ in Bob Pease, *Recreating Men: Postmodern Masculinity Politics* (Sage Publications: London, 2000).

¹³⁷ Mary Poovey, “Feminism and Postmodernism- Another View,” in Margaret Ferguson and Jennifer Wicke, eds., *Feminism and Postmodernism* (Duke University Press: Durham, 1994), 51.

¹³⁸ Eloise A. Buker, *Talking Feminist Politics: Conversations on Law, Science, and the Postmodern* (Rowman & Littlefield: Landham, MD, 1999), 151.

because it is used by most feminists as a litmus test for feminism. However, the postmodern feminism will not allow this because doing so establishes a universal code. Victimization is yet another example because while the state of being a victim is core to many feminist strands it is impossible with postmodern feminism. No group of women is more oppressed than another based on a certain characteristic because every group is both oppressed and the oppressor, powerful and powerless. There is no one true feminism for the postmodern feminist and flexibility is essential for the defeat of patriarchy.¹³⁹ Proponents view the recognition and acceptance of such diversity as possibly the most beneficial aspect of postmodern feminism. Its removal from a dogmatic feminism allows for alliances of every kind to be formed between women on different occasions and for differing purposes.¹⁴⁰ The welcomed plurality of postmodern feminism allows for the practice of feminist politics as women align themselves to tackle a necessary problem and realign themselves to tackle the next.¹⁴¹

A notable aspect of the postmodern feminist stance toward language and labeling is that even the term “woman” is a problem.¹⁴² Postmodern feminists see “woman” as an evolving entity but critics say that without the solidarity provided by the commonality of “woman” the women’s movement and American feminism loses its cohesiveness and effectiveness. This has been noted as a movement toward a postfeminist era right when feminism is challenging patriarchy.¹⁴³ Postmodern feminists view the loss of cohesion as

¹³⁹ *ibid.*, 151-152.

¹⁴⁰ Nancy Fraser and Linda J. Nicholson, “Social Criticism without Philosophy: An Encounter between Feminism and Postmodernism,” in Linda J. Nicholson, ed., *Feminism/Postmodernism* (Routledge: New York, 1990), 35. This concept is also discussed at some length in Buker’s chapter on critical feminism.

¹⁴¹ *ibid.*

¹⁴² Judith Butler is one of the first to theorize about the difficulties in even the label “woman”. See *Gender Trouble, Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Routledge: New York, 1990).

¹⁴³ Buker, 160.

the introduction of a more “flexible feminism” rather than the rejection of feminism.

Postmodernism is a condition of society that makes it essential for feminists to agree to a discourse with non-dogmatic postmodern viewpoints. Such discourse opens the possibility of further emancipation rather than clinging to the outmoded and inherently sexist “humanist subject.”¹⁴⁴ A just society for the postmodern feminist would include a new language where the old forms of patriarchy are excluded and an environment of equality is established regardless of gender. It would also involve a safe and candid environment for the creation of multiple expressions of feminism and the opportunity for these various expressions to disagree and contradict when necessary.

Conclusion

The overview of these nine stands of feminist thought has been an attempt to establish the theoretical foundation of postfeminism. While each of these strands can be found in the second wave, postmodern feminism is the most prominent theoretical underpinning of postfeminism. Before a discussion of postfeminism, however, it is necessary to first discuss a few aspects of modern feminism. The primary of these is the third wave phenomenon that has angered many second wave feminists while simultaneously catching the attention of other women who formerly felt feminism to be the movement of their mothers.

¹⁴⁴ Poovey, 51-52.

Chapter 2: Modern Feminism

Feminism's Third Wave

Just as strands within second wave feminism led to the establishment of new feminist strands in the same era, there have been shortcomings in the second wave in general which have inspired further feminist thought developments. In fact, these shortcomings have led to a substantially new era-- the third wave of feminism. A major problem of the second wave as noted by third wave feminists is that in stressing the collective sisterhood "we," the real differences between women in the women's movement were ignored and at times repressed. Despite the fact that there were many "outside" voices represented in the second wave, these were often exclusionary or separatist in that their specific view or analysis or lifestyle was the only one acceptable as "true" feminism. Third wave feminisms appear to have fewer separatist tendencies. Instead, they appear to acknowledge, embrace and even welcome such differences because the oppression of women overlaps cultural, social, and ideological differences.¹⁴⁵ Indeed, if anything defines the third wave it is messiness.¹⁴⁶

It is difficult to pinpoint the inception of feminism's third wave because of the disagreements as to whether such an era even exists. However, the 1991 Clarence Thomas-Anita Hill hearings are often cited as the foundational events of third wave feminism because of the flurry of feminist activity and gender issue awareness that followed them. Many scholars agree that "something critical to the sustenance of

¹⁴⁵ Thornham, 42

¹⁴⁶ Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake, *Third Wave Agenda: Being feminist, doing feminism* (University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, 1997), 2.

patriarchy died in the confrontation and something new was born.”¹⁴⁷ At the same time that feminist issues surfaced in the institutions of society, pop culture chimed in with productions that became catalysts for this new wave of feminism. These include the film *Thelma and Louise* and the television sitcoms *Roseanne* and *Murphy Brown*. These works portrayed females making strong statements about the condition and response of women.¹⁴⁸ The fact that all of this came on the heels of the virtual feminist void in the 1980s only amplified the message and compounded its effects.

The third wave has been defined as one that comprises “women who were reared in the wake of the women’s liberation movement of the 1970s.”¹⁴⁹ These women came of age during the 1980s and 1990s, and while they are considered apolitical by their second wave mothers, third wave authors argue that this generation is strongly feminist in everyday life (although the definition of feminism has changed for them). Young women have essentially grown up being feminist even if they do not call themselves feminists. This is seen as a tribute to the success of second wave feminism in integrating into the fabric of society.¹⁵⁰

Just as the second wave’s manifesto of sorts was the cry that “the personal is political,” the third wave’s cry could possibly be summed up in the statement “feminism

¹⁴⁷ Wolf, *Fire with Fire*, 5.

¹⁴⁸ Astrid Henry, *Not My Mother’s Sister: Generational Conflict and Third-Wave Feminism* (Indiana University Press: Bloomington, 2004), 17.

¹⁴⁹ Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards, *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism, and the Future* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2000), 15.

¹⁵⁰ *ibid*, 77. This thorough integration of second-wave feminism into society is discussed at length in Kathleen C. Berkeley, *The Women’s Liberation Movement in America* (Greenwood Press: Westport, Connecticut, 1999). In her summary chapter she notes the “transformative effect” of feminism on American society and the lasting changes (both real and imagined) as a result. One of the most notable examples is that feminism has been blamed for the disappearance of the traditional family, or the male breadwinner, female homemaker and dependant children. She notes that the trend of women entering the workforce began in the WWII era and even today, the majority of women work out of financial necessity rather than a desire to have a career.

is not dead; in fact, it's on the rise again, but in a new form."¹⁵¹ The following statement which was drafted by a well known group of third wave feminists, is illustrative of third wave thinking:

We are the 20- and 30-something women who have always known a world with feminism in it. We are putting a new face on feminism, taking it beyond the women's movement that our mothers participated in, bringing it back to the lives of *real women* who juggle jobs, kids, money, and personal freedom in a frenzied world. Women may have been granted grudging access to the job market, but we *still* bear much more of the burden than men: it costs more money to be a woman, we have to work harder just to be considered competent, we do all the emotional maintenance work in relationships, and all the old stereotypes that keep us from being respected unless we act like men remain firmly in place.¹⁵²

The determination of such women is directed both toward the victim mentality as well as those who believe that feminism is no longer necessary. While the second wave criticizes both the perceived lack of political activity of the third wave as well as its lack of unity or cohesiveness, the third wave defends its messiness. Further, third wave feminists respond that this disarray is reality, while second wave cohesiveness was more myth than actuality. They argue that perceived division within the third wave is actually openness and an acknowledgement that each woman has a different experience and therefore acts out feminism in a different way.¹⁵³ While the second wave made attempts to claim the desire of equality for all, the newer versions of feminism abandon all such pretenses. There are no qualms about admitting that it is everyone for herself, and there is no shame in using whatever means necessary to get one's desired result. There is, in essence, a fundamental commitment to self in this "next generation" of feminism. The

¹⁵¹ The 3rd WWWave. "Welcome to the 3rd WWWave!" <http://www.io.com/~wwwwave/>.

¹⁵² *ibid.*

¹⁵³ Barbara Findlen, "Introduction," in Barbara Findlen, ed., *Listen Up: Voices from the Next Feminist Generation* (Seal Press: USA, 1995), xiii.

question that remains is whether this individuality will appeal to the young women that feminism needs to attract in order to endure as a movement.¹⁵⁴

The political sentiments expressed by the third wave are different enough so as to be viewed as apolitical by those of the second wave. For example, the production and consumption of music is noted as being an important form of third wave activism because it fuels the “youth culture.”¹⁵⁵ Feminists of this new era express their angst on the stage rather than the picket line, or on the cover of an album rather than a letter to the editor. An examination of female punk bands in the early 1990s (which were cultural phenomena fueled by feminist goals) reveals a diversity that is illustrative of third wave feminism.¹⁵⁶ The lyrics, sound, stage presence and overall persona made these bands very different from each other and at times contradicting but in the big picture, formed a more accurate view of feminism.¹⁵⁷ However, in a call to arms that would make any second wave activist proud, the use of guerilla tactics in fighting patriarchy was a common discussion among punk scene feminists in the early 1990s.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁴ Ellen R. Klein, *Undressing Feminism: A Philosophical Expose* (Paragon House: St. Paul, Minnesota, 2002), 159.

¹⁵⁵ Heywood and Drake, 203.

¹⁵⁶ All female bands such as these were on the forefront of the Riot Grrrl movement and represented the new young wave of feminism with a myriad of styles. While not all female punk musicians were members of all girl groups, many were and bands like Bratmobile, Bikini Kill, 7 Year Bitch, and Team Dresch represented different facets of women in the punk scene expressing feminist ideology.

¹⁵⁷ Melissa Klein, “Duality and Redefinition: Young Feminism and the Alternative Music Community,” in Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake, *Third Wave Agenda: Being feminist, doing feminism* (University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, 1997), 216. See Karen Lehrman, *The Lipstick Proviso: Women, Sex & Power in the Real World*, for a discussion on how the punk scene was certainly not the only arena for female artists to express the contradictions of femininity in the new era of feminism. Rock stars such as Alanis Morissette and Tori Amos rose to stardom quickly and decidedly at the end of the 1990s. They screamed their angst on stage while seductively straddling a piano bench or flaunting an evening gown.

¹⁵⁸ *ibid*, 218-219. The term “guerilla tactics” is used in Melissa Klein’s discussion to refer to aggressive or even violent actions toward men and/or institutions viewed as promoting patriarchy. This is more in keeping with old guard feminism where the march, protest, and picket lines were the battlegrounds.

The reason third wave feminists do not fit the mold of second wave activism does not appear to be a lack of the desire to act politically but rather a loss as to how this should or can be done. While voting rights and the fight for the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) drew past generations of women together into cohesive action, there is not a single overarching goal to unify today's feminists into a sisterhood. Even recent statements of purpose from NOW are vague enough to leave women to guess as to the means of political activation.¹⁵⁹ It appears that without a unifying goal feminism has increasingly become a movement of PACs in which small local groups pursue individual strides toward equality.¹⁶⁰ A modern feminist viewpoint could be that "under real feminism, women have ultimate responsibility for their problems, happiness, and lives. The personal, in other words, is no longer political."¹⁶¹ At the same time, however, the focus has shifted in feminism from the political to the personal. While this does not mean that the political forays of feminism are at an end, for the third wave it does mean that much of the progress left to be made on behalf of women must be done in a non-political manner, that is, on the personal level.¹⁶² Third wave women are feminists who promote feminist values in a different arena than their mothers.

The generational aspect of third wave feminism is central to the whole movement in that it colors the views both of and by earlier feminism. The concept of the third wave is often based on generational differences, but it has also come to be seen as a representation of a group of feminists that wishes to establish a feminism distinct from

¹⁵⁹ Klein, *Undressing Feminism*, 149. Klein is referring to NOW's 2000 statement of purpose which in emphasizing everything emphasizes nothing. Vague goals like "equal partnership with men" and "creating a feminist society" do not constitute a unifying purpose capable of solidifying female efforts and changing society. A women's movement needs a cause and NOW statements of purpose do not provide one.

¹⁶⁰ *ibid*, 149-150.

¹⁶¹ Lehrman, 5.

¹⁶² *ibid*, 13.

the second wave.¹⁶³ In this same vein, the waves of feminism have come to be viewed less as political affiliations and more as familial ones. Thus the earlier waves become “mothers” and the later waves “daughters.” The danger in this according to some feminists is that it is soon forgotten that the political identifications within are chosen even though they are presented in a familial fashion.¹⁶⁴ In other words, third wave “daughters” are still feminists and willingly so even though they are responding, sometimes negatively, to the shortcomings of their second wave “mothers.”

The third wave with all its contradictions and seeming disparities can be summarized quite succinctly by noting that

For third wave feminists, there is no one right way to be: no role, no model. One of the strengths of third wave feminism is its refusal of a singular liberal-humanist subjectivity. With no utopic [*sic*] vision of the perfectly egalitarian society or the fully realized individual, third wave feminists work with the fragmentation of existing identities and institutions. If third wave feminism distinguishes itself from the second wave in any definable way, it is in its emphasis on making room for contradictions. We struggle to accommodate the differences *between* people as well as *within* them. Third wave feminism looks for, ferrets out, and defines our contradictions-which ones we can live with, which ones we cannot, in ourselves, in our society-and these depend on the context.¹⁶⁵

In essence, third wave feminists find strength in diversity and use this platform to attempt a link between formerly incongruent worlds.

Much in the same way that race relations in this country have moved from the ideal of the “color-blind society” toward promotion of diversity and multiculturalism, feminism has moved away from a struggle for equality toward an engagement with difference, and assertion that girls can have

¹⁶³ Henry, 3.

¹⁶⁴ *ibid*, 7.

¹⁶⁵ Jennifer Reed, “Roseanne: A “Killer Bitch” for Generation X,” in Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake, *Third Wave Agenda: Being feminist, doing feminism* (University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, 1997), 124.

the best of both worlds (that they, for example, can be both violently angry and vampily [*sic*] glamorous).¹⁶⁶

The newest trend with younger feminists, in fact, is to flaunt sexuality in a way that has traditionally been associated with “pre-feminist, non-feminist” and even “dissident feminist attitude.” These women are called Girlie feminists and believe that “strength and power come, not from being *like men*, but from being liked *by men*...” The goal, however, remains the same-- to subvert patriarchy.¹⁶⁷

The diversity within the third wave as accentuated by Girlie feminists, punk feminists and academic feminists points to a foundational dilemma. The classic question of feminism, the “woman question” is asked and answered differently by each strand and wave of feminism, and the third wave is no exception. The question of equality and gender differences is inseparable from feminism because it is the very crux of the issue. Are men and women the same, and as such can equality be achieved simply by allowing for equality of opportunity? Or are there gender differences that make the male standard an unfair or irrelevant plumb line for the assessment of female achievement? These differing points of view are often called “equality feminism” and “difference feminism,” and modern feminism appears to believe the answer to the “woman question” lies within the combination of the two. Otherwise, equality for women comes at the price of being the same as men.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁶ Klein, *Undressing Feminism*, 207-208.

¹⁶⁷ *ibid*, 141.

¹⁶⁸ Carol Gilligan, “Getting Civilized,” in Ann Oakley and Juliet Mitchell, *Who’s Afraid of Feminism? Seeing Through the Backlash* (The New Press: New York, 1997), 16.

Modern Feminism

Much of what can be described as modern feminism is little more than a reprise of the original strands of feminism. The most notable and varied modern feminism is the third wave due to its recent inception as well as its disputed existence in some feminist circles. But while the third wave is a prominent face in modern feminism it is not the only modern feminism. Third wave feminism is solidified in its “messy” diversity, but modern feminism appears to have its own version of messy as it may vary according to the feminist. There are innumerable definitions and variations within modern feminism, but it is less about a specific viewpoint or dogma and more about the current face of feminism. Where does feminism stand in the new millennium? What are feminists writing and theorizing about? These questions have a variety of specific answers, but the more accurate responses are generalizations. In general, modern feminism addresses questions that feminism has always addressed. Modern feminists are interested in questions of equality and what it means to be a feminist, and there is a great deal of discussion about the “feminist backlash.”

An important shift in feminist theory changed the face of modern feminism. Equality according to modern feminism is best understood when viewed in its historical position. One such overview of the history and progress of feminism describes the inception of feminism as relying on “warrior women” who achieved greatness through the virtues of honor, duty, courage and selflessness but did so as human beings rather than “women.” They battled on the same fields as men with no expectation of special treatment or a cushioned war environment. The list of such women is long, but notably

does not extend past the second wave where a shift in feminist theory took place.¹⁶⁹ Here the division came between the first generation of feminism which sought equality with men and the second generation which went on the offensive, declaring war on male domination. The shift was from seeking equality with men to seeking privilege over men.¹⁷⁰ The result of this shift was the politicization of all aspects of personal life. In addition, much was lost when privileges were sought for women because true equality in the public sphere must be achieved in a gender-neutral environment. This, of course, means the denial of special privileges for anyone, including women.¹⁷¹

While such “equality” is desirable for many feminists, it is undesirable for others who view this gender-neutral stance as requiring the feminine to be masculine. This stance is reminiscent of the second wave tendency to value male characteristics over female, viewing femininity as weak, passive and parasitical among other things.¹⁷² This dilemma is answered by feminists such as Girlie feminists and many other third wavers who flaunt their femininity and sexuality.¹⁷³ Such a reaction has in many cases led to

¹⁶⁹ Klein, *Undressing Feminism*, *ibid*, 159-163. The list in the text is taken from Gemma Alexander, ed., *The Mammoth Book of Heroic & Outrageous Women* (New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, 1999), Ch.4. It includes numerous historical war figures such as Joan of Arc, Christina Cavanaugh, Josephine Baker, Queen Boadicea and many others (many disguised as men) who fought on battlefields or led troops into battle.

¹⁷⁰ *ibid*, 72. This shift in the underlying ideology of feminism is discussed as well in Karen Lehrmen’s *The Lipstick Proviso*. The self-development, independence and personal responsibility that were foundational for liberal feminism have often been dismissed in modern feminism as sexist and naïve. The problem, however, according to critics is that women are left looking and feeling helpless and victimized rather than empowered and enlightened, (24). Ann Brooks in *Postfeminists: Feminism, cultural theory, and cultural forms* (Routledge: New York, 1997), asserts that the conceptual shift within feminism from a focus on debates about equality to debates about difference laid the foundation for the academic discussion of postfeminism, (4).

¹⁷¹ *ibid*, 24-25.

¹⁷² Hollows, 9-14.

¹⁷³ Sexuality within the third wave is a convoluted topic that involves pro-sex, anti-sex, pro-heterosexual, anti-heterosexual divisions and is far too lengthy for the present chapter. It is based upon the notion that younger women assume sexual freedom as a birthright and now the details of such freedom must be debated. Sexuality as it relates to postfeminism will be discussed in a later chapter, however, for a thorough discussion of third wave angles see Astrid Henry, *Not My Mother’s Sister*, 90-114.

claims of a feminist backlash, which is a common theme in modern feminist writings.

The oft-cited backlash is allegedly the result of widespread views such as the following:

(1) that women are no longer discriminated against; (2) that feminists exaggerate(d) the extent of such discrimination; (3) that feminism has never represented the interests of women as a group; (4) that feminism is principally, and unhelpfully, a language of victimization; (5) that feminism ignores the social and personal importance of the family, including to women and (6) that feminists inaccurately portray discrimination against women as a male conspiracy.¹⁷⁴

Modern feminism is as much about the dissent within feminism as it is about tweaking feminist theory. In fact, there is a great deal of criticism directed toward feminism in the new millennium. These criticisms come in four basic forms. First, some believe there is a tendency in modern feminism to subvert the real definition of feminism- which is the freedom to choose one's life- and replace it with a monolithic concept of emancipated femininity.¹⁷⁵ Purveyors of this view complain about the "policing nature" of many women's studies programs in universities across the country.¹⁷⁶ Second, some see a divergence between the expectations of the average woman and those of feminism as feminism becomes increasingly focused on narrow topics rather than ones that appeal to a majority of women and would affect their everyday lives. Third, some feminists believe that the feminist call for government intervention on behalf of women is neither desirable nor necessary for all circumstances. Finally, there are some critics who simply raise reasonable objection to extremes of the feminist movement.

¹⁷⁴ Ann Oakley, "A Brief History of Gender," in Ann Oakley and Juliet Mitchell, eds., *Who's Afraid of Feminism? Seeing Through the Backlash* (The New Press: New York, 1997), 33-34.

¹⁷⁵ Lehrman, 10.

¹⁷⁶ Daphne Patai and Noretta Koertge, *Professing Feminism: Education and Indoctrination in Women's Studies* (Lexington Books: Lanham, Maryland, 2003), xiv. This policing activity is described as "strict enforcement of whatever the prevailing feminist norms happen to be." Such policing activities are also mentioned in Joan D. Mandle's *Can We Wear Our Pearls And Still Be Feminists? Memoirs of a Campus Struggle* (University of Missouri Press: Columbia, 2000), where she discusses her experiences as the Director of a Women's Studies Program at Colgate University, (21).

These extremes include

the rhetoric or policy proposals that can be construed as anti-men, anti-sex, anti-family, anti-beauty, anti-religion, or anti-nature; the assumption that all women have the same (leftist) political opinions; and the calls for special privileges for women (quotas or the lowering of job standards) and mandatory behavior modifications for men.¹⁷⁷

The idea behind feminism is equality of opportunity rather than equality of outcome. The fact then that many professions do not have equal numbers of men and women is not a symbol of the failure of feminism. The fact that women choose whether or not they want to enter such a profession is a measure of success.¹⁷⁸

When assessing modern feminism, many feminists have begun to admit that feminist theory needs updating to appeal to women outside academia or apply to the real lives of these individuals. The wish of these feminists is not to abandon feminist theory, but rather to face the fact that feminist theorizing as it stands today is often inapplicable to “life in the trenches”- that is, life as an American woman raising a family, working at a career, or otherwise getting on with the business of living.¹⁷⁹ Modern feminism faces many challenges, including the familiar wage disparity, child care and health care issues, and domestic and sexual violence problems. However, when the future of feminism is assessed, some make the projection that these issues will be addressed on an international scale and that now dissimilar groups of women will join forces to tackle common

¹⁷⁷ Lehrman, 10

¹⁷⁸ *ibid*, 11.

¹⁷⁹ *ibid*, 3. Betty Friedan’s *The Second Stage* (Summit Books: New York, 1981) is a good example of this. As Friedan examines the women’s movement from its inception shortly after the publishing of her first book (*The Feminine Mystique*) she acknowledges that feminism has missed some substance in ignoring the importance of family life and mothering; that these must be reincorporated in feminism is to appeal to women in coming generations.

problems. In essence, the next step in the progression of women is thought to be the emergence of a global feminism.¹⁸⁰

However, while the international and global facets of feminism are developing there remain the debates within feminism that are currently shaping American feminism. Equality is still the overarching question of feminism. When the subjects of inequality and its causes are breached there is immediate variance in modern feminism. Essentially, women have not competed on the global scene competitively with men for one of two reasons: (1) They are incapable of achieving artistic, intellectual and political feats on the same level as men; or (2) they have been prevented from the competition by an overriding and determined conspiracy to keep them subjected (patriarchy). But this is still not the full debate because there is a camp that rejects both of these as absurd, stating that the only reason most women have not competed with men in political, social and cultural venues is because they choose not to. Many women give up top careers or choose more family-friendly arenas for the simple reason that they want to be married and raise children.¹⁸¹

The variations in modern feminism are extreme. Modern feminists include those that assert the absence of a single feminism and the subsequent futility of a feminist interpretation of events, feminist leaders or a sole feminist agenda. This is because such attempts at solidarity undermine true feminism, which is the freedom for individual women to be diversified persons.¹⁸² Along similar lines, other feminist voices claim that the “our” of feminism is not strictly female. Such a view believes, for instance, that

¹⁸⁰ Berkeley, 108.

¹⁸¹ Klein, *Undressing Feminism*, 163-174.

¹⁸² Lehrman, 19.

“feminism should not be primarily about getting more for women as a group. Instead it should be about creating a fairer and more just society.”¹⁸³ This is another angle of the sisterhood debate within modern feminism. There are those who feel that a united class of women is necessary to fight oppression, and there are those who feel such a united front to be passé and unrealistic. Thus, the resulting shift back toward individuality is welcomed because not only is individualism thought to be the root of feminism, but also the link to the freedom of choice so prized within feminism. Free will and self-determination are thus granted to women whether the choice is to climb the corporate ladder or to stay at home with children.¹⁸⁴

A discussion of the nuances and theoretical veins of modern feminism could easily continue without end. However, the intention here has only been to lay a foundation for the discussion of postfeminism. Many references to modern feminism refer to *all* feminist theory since feminism’s reinvention in the 1960s. However, here modern feminism refers to feminism in the last twenty years or feminism since the feminist void of the 1980s. Modern feminism has been explored because it is imperative for a meaningful discussion of postfeminism to include the foundational aspects of modern feminism in general and third wave feminism in particular. Postfeminism is both a response to, and an extension of, this vein of feminist thought.

¹⁸³ Mandle, 92.

¹⁸⁴ Lehrman, 14.

Chapter 3: Postfeminism

The Study of Postfeminism

To entitle this section “the study of postfeminism” is somewhat misleading because a cohesive study of this subject does not appear to exist. However, an effort to collect the scattered references and conceptions of postfeminism is made here in order to solidify this object of study. Without such an endeavor an attempt to define or contextualize postfeminism would be both impossible and fruitless. The problem with postfeminism, as with feminism, lies in the definition. In fact, it is possibly more difficult to define because unlike the countless feminist writers published over the past four decades, there are no self-proclaimed postfeminist theorists. While postfeminism has been theorized about to be sure, even writers such as Camille Paglia, Katie Roiphe, and Naomi Wolf, who have often been labeled postfeminist writers, have been deemed such *by other people*.¹⁸⁵ Other writings about postfeminism have been done by feminists angered by the notion of postfeminism and determined to prove its ineffectiveness in order to preserve established feminist ideas¹⁸⁶ or by those intrigued with the possibilities of what postfeminism may add to feminism.¹⁸⁷

Postfeminism is a problematic word in feminist circles partly because there has yet to be a concise or agreed upon definition. It is therefore often seen as nothing more

¹⁸⁵ All three of these authors have written very strong attacks against the women-as-victims mentality of Second wave feminism. None of them are self-proclaimed postfeminists but rather have been labeled this by others, mostly feminist writers in disagreement with their writings. See Henry, 30 for mention of this practice by third wave feminists who wish to distance the third wave from postfeminism.

¹⁸⁶ Frances E. Mascia-Lees and Patricia Sharpe, *Taking a Stand in a Postfeminist World* (State University of New York Press, Albany, NY, 2000).

¹⁸⁷ An example of this is Ann Brooks in her book *Postfeminists: Feminism, cultural theory, and cultural forms*.

than anti-feminist sentiment cloaked as postfeminism.¹⁸⁸ Further adding to the mystery of postfeminism is the fact that it means something different in academia than it does in popular culture. The Concise Oxford Dictionary defines postfeminism as “of or relating to the ideas, attitudes, etc., which ignore or reject feminist attitudes of the 1960s and subsequent decades.”¹⁸⁹ For many feminists, then, postfeminism is nothing more than the backlash against feminism, part of “The Undeclared War Against Women” as Susan Faludi calls it in the title of her book. To these defenders of feminism, postfeminism is a “knee-jerk” reaction, an attempt to maintain the current condition of unattained equality of women.¹⁹⁰ In the eyes of such feminists, the goal of postfeminism is to haul society back to the days before the 19th Amendment.¹⁹¹ But women do not yet have a sure enough footing in the political, social, and economic spheres of modern culture for feminism to be dismissed.¹⁹² The end result is the death of feminism.¹⁹³ Postfeminism, however, is referenced in both popular culture and academia to an extent that it has become integral to the study of feminism and therefore cannot be dismissed without examination. If the state of women in America is to be truly understood, the political landscape must be examined in its entirety.

Since American feminism is most often described in terms of waves, the natural implication is that each new wave is built on the previous one just as ocean waves build upon one another. This is disturbing for those who view this newest wave of feminism,

¹⁸⁸ Siegel, 66.

¹⁸⁹ Sarah Gamble, *The Routledge Critical Dictionary of Feminism and Postfeminism* (Routledge: New York, 2000), 44.

¹⁹⁰ *ibid*, 46.

¹⁹¹ *ibid*, 45.

¹⁹² Siegel, 75.

¹⁹³ Kavka, xi.

be it third or post, as an end to the second wave.¹⁹⁴ A description or definition of postfeminism is further troubled by the very prefix “post”, often thought to mean a movement beyond the previous caused by a ceasing of the previous. In other words, many feminists claim that there can be no “postfeminism” because male domination still exists, thereby making feminism necessary.¹⁹⁵

However, regardless of whether postfeminism is the third wave or simply part of it, the very idea of postfeminism understandably appears ghastly to the second wave feminist because “post” is in fact a prefix that normally means a break with the past. When in reference to postfeminism, however, others believe it should be interpreted as meaning a “process of ongoing transformation and change.”¹⁹⁶ Postfeminism is thought to be feminism’s “coming of age” because while it may take a critical position toward some earlier feminist frameworks, it still engages with many of the concerns of feminists.¹⁹⁷ Likewise, “post” does not necessarily mean a return to a previous existence as the fear of pre-19th Amendment days may suggest. Rather, it can also mean a “continuation of the originating term’s aims and ideologies albeit on a different level.”¹⁹⁸ The relatively few authors who specifically attempt to define postfeminism always start by articulating that it does *not* signify the end of feminism, but rather a shift.¹⁹⁹ In this view, “postfeminism may be read as progression of feminism,” “a movement out of

¹⁹⁴ Irene Karras, ‘The Third Wave’s Final Girl: Buffy the Vampire Slayer,’ *Thirdspace* (vol. 2, no. 2, March 2002, <http://www.thirdspace.ca/articles/>), 4.

¹⁹⁵ Thompson, 2

¹⁹⁶ Brooks, 1.

¹⁹⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁹⁸ Gamble, 45

¹⁹⁹ Sophia Phoca and Rebecca Wright, *Introducing Postfeminism* (New York: Totem Books, 1999), 3.

certain impasses within the women's movement and into new terrains of gender politics."²⁰⁰

References to postfeminism are not new. In fact, Susan Faludi asserts that the first such reference was seen in the press in the 1920s after adoption of the 19th Amendment as an indicator that activism on behalf of women was no longer necessary.²⁰¹ The term first appeared with any regularity in the early 1980s.²⁰² In fact, the whole era of the 1980s is described by some as a post-feminist era, one in which feminism had achieved all its desired aims and was no longer relevant to women who lived with its accomplishments. Feminism became a passé topic because it was both successful and unsuccessful.²⁰³ However, the sparsely noted post-feminism of the 1980s is vastly different from the cultural postfeminist phenomenon of the present, much of which has to do with popular culture and media, particularly films and television. Popular culture provides one of the best glimpses into the world and characteristics of postfeminism.

Postfeminism and Popular Culture

Feminist media studies have started examining postfeminism's appearances in cinema and television because although postfeminism is seen by feminists as an inaccurate way to detail the history of feminism, cinema has been "postfeminized."²⁰⁴ This makes exploration of this trend a necessary focal point of media studies because it

²⁰⁰ Kathryn Hausbeck, *Spectral Feminisms: Analyzing Postfeminism, 1981-1992*, Dissertation (The State University of New York at Buffalo, 1997), 181.

²⁰¹ Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (Crown Publishers, Inc.: New York, 1991), 50.

²⁰² Chris Holmlund, 'Postfeminism from A to G,' *Cinema Journal* (vol. 44, no.2, 2005), sites this appearance as a 1982 New York Times magazine article entitled "Voices from the Postfeminism Generation." See also Astrid Henry's *Not My Mother's Sister* which notes the appearance of postfeminism in the 1980's as an attempt to declare feminism passé.

²⁰³ Henry, 19-21.

²⁰⁴ Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra, 'In Focus: Postfeminism and Contemporary Media Studies,' *Cinema Journal* (vol. 44, no. 2, 2005), 109.

“now accurately describes how filmmakers, audiences, and the media may conceptualize certain characters and narratives.”²⁰⁵ The recent emergence of postfeminist media studies leans heavily toward dramas and sitcoms that are female-centered, as well as other venues such as romantic comedies that appeal to a mostly female audience.²⁰⁶ Films are a common medium for postfeminist statements and ideology because postfeminism appears to be largely a popular culture driven concept. Popular culture was the arena that first identified and promoted postfeminist trends. For the most part, films considered to be the beginning of a postfeminist trend are late-1980s to early-1990s projects produced with well known stars and large budgets. Examples are *Pretty Woman*, *Fatal Attraction*, *Basic Instinct*, *Baby Boom*, and *Ghost*.²⁰⁷

When postfeminist films are interrogated by feminists it is normally not with a favorable stance. In fact, there is a preset idea about postfeminism and its expression in the cinema that ensures most commentators will “envision postfeminism as a white ‘chick’ backlash that denies class, avoids race, ignores (older) age, and ‘straight’-jackets sexuality.”²⁰⁸ In general, the heroines in postfeminist films have professional careers, often in exciting traditionally male roles, but the focus of the story is on romance more than action.²⁰⁹ For feminists, there are a number of disturbing tendencies in the postfeminist film, including a pre-packaged and somewhat diluted form of feminism that acknowledges feminist contributions to the advancement of women but displays it in such a way as to effectively stifle any meaningful feminist discussions. In addition, the

²⁰⁵ Linda Mizejewski, ‘Dressed to Kill: Postfeminist noir.’ *Cinema Journal* (vol. 44, no.2, 2005), 123.

²⁰⁶ Tasker and Negra, 107.

²⁰⁷ Holmlund, 117.

²⁰⁸ *ibid.*

²⁰⁹ See Holmlund’s article for a discussion of the 1997 film *Out of Sight*. Jennifer Lopez plays an FBI marshal who falls for a gentlemanly thief. She gets it all in the end but the emphasis is on her relationship more than her vocation.

freedom of choice in life decisions displayed by female characters is always accompanied by loss of some sort. The heroine might indeed rise to the top of her field but it costs her emotionally, relationally or romantically.²¹⁰

Postfeminism as it is portrayed in films is characterized by a “double address” that positions female success at entering traditionally male dominated fields such as business, law and politics alongside a keen discontent with the residual effects of feminism, particularly second wave feminism.²¹¹ The result of this is that the context in which the disconnection between the personal and professional lives of women is discussed is postfeminist rather than feminist. In other words, rather than such a discussion focusing on inequalities between the genders and possible solutions to these shortcomings, it is centered on discontentment with where feminism has left women. Another common theme in postfeminist films is what feminists call “retreatism” or “downsizing.” In a typical postfeminist scenario a “well-educated white female professional displays her ‘empowerment’ and caring nature by withdrawing from the workforce (and symbolically from the public sphere) to devote herself to husband and family.”²¹² In these films, the traditional roles selected through empowered decision-making are seen as more desirable alternatives to the feminist counter-options of career building or remaining single.²¹³

²¹⁰ Tasker and Negra, 107. In keeping with this message, romance films often emphasize a woman’s need to tone down her professionalism in order to maintain her femininity that inevitably attracts a man. Examples of this are found in Diane Negra, ‘Quality Postfeminism? Sex and the Single Girl on HBO,’ *Genders* (issue 39, 2004, [http:// www.genders.org/g39/g39_negra.html](http://www.genders.org/g39/g39_negra.html)), and include *One Fine Day*, *The Wedding Planner*, *Someone Like You*, *Miss Congeniality*, *Six Days and Seven Nights*, and *Bed of Roses*, (3).

²¹¹ *ibid*, 108.

²¹² *ibid*.

²¹³ Tasker and Negra list a number of films in which this type of retreatism is evident. These include *Cheaper by the Dozen*, *13 Going on Thirty*, *Kate & Leopold*, and *Two Weeks’ Notice*. Also evident in the

Postfeminist labeled films can follow somewhat different paths. “A few celebrate the poise, panache, and performance of the ‘girly woman’ or relish the coolly cutthroat competence of the ‘glam’ exec.”²¹⁴ But overall, the postfeminist message of women in the parallel but separate worlds of the public and the private is evident even if this parallel existence requires sometimes difficult choices. Cinema, however, is not the lone setting where postfeminist themes are apparent. The 1980s saw a boon of what has been described as postfeminist television. There were several different genres including sitcoms and serial dramas, but similar themes about women pervaded them all. Much like the portrayal in films, women in shows such as *L.A. Law*, *Hill Street Blues*, *Family Ties*, *The Cosby Show*, and *thirtysomething*, were depicted as being in successful careers, but these were either rarely or never pictured as part of the plot, or the careers were experienced to the detriment of personal happiness.²¹⁵ In essence, the postfeminist obsession with work vs. family was the theme of each of these shows.

While the 1980s saw the introduction to postfeminist television, the trend continues today with many of the same themes. Often in dramas, a woman’s career causes unhappiness because of mental stress, reproductive difficulties, or elusive romance and marriage, while in the sitcoms a woman’s career is a subplot to the more important theme of the happy, ideal family and its interactions. Just as importantly, the concept of sisterhood or female bonding is almost completely absent from postfeminist programming. This reinforces the postfeminist idea that the individual woman must face

retreatism tendencies of films is the hometown fantasy where the heroine returns to fulfill her domestic identity. Examples of this, found in Negra’s article include the films *Practical Magic*, *Hope Floats*, *One True Thing*, and *Sweet Home Alabama*, (3).

²¹⁴ Holmlund, 17.

²¹⁵ Bonnie J. Dow, *Prime-Time Feminism: Television, Media Culture, and the Women’s Movement Since 1970* (University of Pennsylvania Press: Philadelphia, 1996), 97-100.

her own problems. The dilemmas confronting women are a result of individual choice rendering collective action useless and therefore unnecessary.²¹⁶ In postfeminist television, politics are “a function of personality” more than “the product of social structure or selective action” and women faced with challenges overcome them based on competence and self assurance rather than any sort of group effort.²¹⁷

Postfeminism and particularly postfeminist television relies on nostalgia, or the pining for the days of old when women’s lives were easier despite the fact that they had limited choices.²¹⁸ The era of postfeminist television is in essence a return to the values of the 1950s where the trend is to show women at the center of family life. The work identity that most female television characters now have is never achieved at the expense of the family role²¹⁹ and women are more frequently seen in full time domestic and mothering roles.²²⁰ Even where women have made advances in the world of television by adopting many of the professional roles traditionally reserved for men, there is still an underlying stigma that separates them from the male world. These female characters are always placed in the roles of either sex object or mother in addition to their professional status in order to satisfy society’s requirement that femininity encompass either or both of these features.²²¹

Shows such as *Family Law* and *Judging Amy* allowed women to “leave home” in the professional sense, but not in an emotional sense because their professional careers

²¹⁶ *ibid.*

²¹⁷ Andrea L. Press, *Women Watching Television: Gender, Class, and Generation in the American Television Experience* (University of Pennsylvania Press: Philadelphia, 1991), 39.

²¹⁸ Dow, 169.

²¹⁹ Press, 38.

²²⁰ Several recent sitcoms including *Everybody Loves Raymond*, *According to Jim*, and *Yes, Dear* are examples of this scenario.

²²¹ Susannah B. Mintz, “In a Word, *Baywatch*,” in Rory Dicker and Alison Piepmeier, eds., *Catching a Wave: Reclaiming Feminism for the 21st Century* (Northeastern University Press: Boston, 2003), 60.

placed them as champions of the family and children thus effectively reinforcing the ideas that women are more nurturing, caring and “highly attuned to interpersonal dynamics.”²²² Women in television are being “redomesticated” as an attempt to keep the lines between male and female worlds well defined and they are allowed to be intelligent, but must be gorgeous or motherly as well.²²³ Even the television series *Sex and the City* while praised for its feminist portrayal of single professional women as competent individuals capable of female collaboration is still intertwined with postfeminist themes such as high socioeconomic station and a lack of racial diversity.²²⁴

Buffy the Vampire Slayer is often touted as the ideal example of postfeminist television. The show entered uncharted territory when it presented a female heroine with all of her feminine complexities. Unlike previous portrayals of female heroines, *Buffy* is not required to be masculine thus opening up the possibility for female power instead of honorary male status.²²⁵ In essence, the show represents “a spectrum of possibilities for contemporary womanhood that includes superior intelligence, physical strength, the desire for relationship, the quest for independence, and the refusal to be dominated, circumscribed, or limited in action and mobility.”²²⁶ It’s “feminist impulse says that women should be able to protect themselves and their loved ones, to be respected for their intellectual and physical capabilities, to insist on their right to emotional and bodily integrity, and to desire to be nurtured as well as to nurture.”²²⁷ But at the same time *Buffy*

²²² *ibid.*

²²³ *ibid.*, 61.

²²⁴ Negra, 11-12.

²²⁵ Michele Byers, “*Buffy the Vampire Slayer*: The Next Generation of Television,” in Rory Dicker and Alison Piepmeier, eds., *Catching a Wave: Reclaiming Feminism for the 21st Century* (Northeastern University Press: Boston, 2003), 172.

²²⁶ *ibid.*, 173.

²²⁷ *ibid.*, 172.

is also criticized by feminists as being non-feminist due to its display of the ideal young, thin, white and beautiful body image. The characters on the show are attractive and desire to be so even if it is in the most traditional Hollywood sense and there is an ongoing struggle with the feminine desire to be attractive to men.²²⁸ *Buffy* is also problematic for feminists because of its lack of diversity. The only differences or “others” are seen in the form of the vampires and demons that must be eliminated. This could be a racist subtlety or possibly a metaphor for the buried differences of second wave feminism.²²⁹ In spite of its shortcomings, however, *Buffy* is also viewed as a text with feminist implications because of the hopeful version of womanhood that it offers to its primarily youthful audience.²³⁰

The female as a powerful and independent heroine is seen elsewhere in television, most recently with the action drama series *Alias* (2001-2006). In this show Sidney Bristow is a daring and seemingly fearless CIA agent who continually goes undercover on dangerous missions to save the world from evil people, some shifting and some continual, bent on absolute power. She is strong, remarkably intelligent, beautiful, feminine and unparalleled at fighting agility. In what is becoming typical postfeminist fashion there is an almost contradictory blend of worlds as agent Bristow rescues and is rescued in turn, remains fiercely loyal to those she loves and a constant danger to those she doesn't, becomes romantically involved, marries and carries the child of a fellow

²²⁸ *ibid*, 174-177.

²²⁹ *ibid*, 182-183.

²³⁰ It is also important to note that on *Buffy* the elder male—the father figure—is portrayed as competent but less powerful than Buffy. Moreover, other males in her universe are portrayed as feckless, weak, and meek.

agent while accomplishing superhuman feats with the all male cast as a backdrop.²³¹

Such variance in the experience of this heroine could be seen as yet another embodiment of the “superwoman” syndrome that has exhausted women for the last several decades. However, similar to *Buffy*, it could also be an exploration of femininity with all its complexities.

The many postfeminist statements made by cinema and television through films and programming are just part of the postfeminist popular culture, or “pop postfeminism”²³² that has an increasing presence in American society. *Time Magazine*’s now infamous 1998 cover asking “Is Feminism Dead?”²³³ declares that much of today’s feminism is not the politically-conscious feminism of the past. Instead, it seems to be driven by “a popular culture insistent on offering images of grown single-women as frazzled, self-absorbed girls.”²³⁴ It is in essence, silly and its icons are no less so with Ally McBeal being a prototype of this image.²³⁵ Although the question of whether feminism is dead is never definitively answered it is certain that feminism has taken on a new form of, “glitz and glamour,” “wed to the culture of celebrity and self-obsession.”²³⁶

²³¹ *Alias* saw the entrance and exit of many tough female characters throughout its five seasons. These ranged from Sidney’s mother and sister, also agents with various organizations to other spies frequently confronted by Sidney. There was also a stint with the presence of a traitorous female agent within the CIA and the introduction of agent Rachel Green toward end of *Alias* presumably to embody the “sexy” element missing once actress Jennifer Garner became pregnant part way through the season. However, for the entirety of the show, Sidney Bristow was the focal character who although aided by fellow male agents and her male partner, was often sent into undercover situations alone and almost always as the only female.

²³² Mizejewski, 123. Mizejewski identifies “pop postfeminism” as containing many contradictions that are exposed through the varying characters and stories labeled as postfeminist. As with most references to pop culture, the implication is the fleeting and shallow nature of trends proclaimed by this medium.

²³³ *Time Magazine*’s cover pictures Susan B. Anthony, Betty Friedan and Gloria Steinem in black and white with an additional picture of Ally McBeal in color under the heading, “Is Feminism Dead”, implying of course, that Ally McBeal and all her implications sounds a possible death knell for feminism.

²³⁴ Gina Bellafante, ‘Feminism: It’s All About Me,’ *Time Magazine*, (vol. 151, no. 25, June 29, 1998), 58.

²³⁵ She is considered to be such an icon because while she has achieved the professional status of success, her personal life, accented by childish musings and mannerisms is overshadowing.

²³⁶ *ibid*, 58.

In essence, feminism has “gone Hollywood” and rather than focusing on social causes and mutual goals, theorizing is introspective and self-absorbed.²³⁷ From The Spice Girls with their outrageous skimpy outfits to recent supposed feminist polemics, the feminist climate does not appear promising as pop culture plunges into the increasingly absurd, taking feminism with it. According to *Time*, there is a narcissistic theme to the current feminist environment which is further evidenced by the establishment of the autobiography as theory. Here “airy” and sometimes “ludicrous” reflections are meant to add to the general understanding of “the female experience.”²³⁸

While the feminist response to *Time*’s assessment of feminism was harsh and unfavorable because it ignored the academic realm of feminism and the progression in this arena, the point was still made that there is an evident shift in the public consciousness. Postfeminism was not mentioned specifically in the article leaving one to suppose that its existence is either unacknowledged or subsumed under the heading of feminism. But this doesn’t eliminate the question of whether pop culture’s celebration of bodies and beauty, glitz and glamour, princesses and power, is anything more than the usual dismissal of “real” feminism. The question should not be whether feminism is dead, but rather if popular culture’s version of the female experience is at all applicable to women and whether these emerging trends are postfeminist.

Many feminists would likely claim that the denigration of feminism in popular culture is indeed evidence of an anti-feminist backlash, even a postfeminist endeavor. But the reason for this and the reason for the emergence of postfeminist media messages is a

²³⁷ *ibid*, 54.

²³⁸ *ibid*, 59. Ally McBeal and Bridget Jones are two frequently used examples of the flighty musings of single women who supposedly embody much of feminism’s gains yet spend a great deal of time thinking about themselves and their romantic entanglements.

key to understanding postfeminism. Popular culture's obsession with material possessions and wealth has a great deal of effect on the political climate and not only in campaigns and elections. The power of money is also evidenced in political discourse. If postfeminism is indeed a construct of popular culture aided by the mediums of pop culture, i.e. music, movies, celebrities and television, then the energy behind much of this is corporate sponsored advertising. Advertisements, for example, are more than the inconvenient price viewers must pay for watching television. Instead, according to television critics, they are the point of it. It is the goal of television programming to create a target audience that will be receptive to goods and services and in the process of this exchange an entire identity is often packaged and sold.²³⁹

In this way, postfeminism has been linked with advertising through the creation of "commodity feminism" where products are infused with meaning that then equated with feminist goals such as independence. This blend of feminism and femininity dilutes feminism into a depoliticized and rather meaningless form that can be easily digested by postfeminist audiences.²⁴⁰ An example of the construction of identity is found in *Ally McBeal* where the show and its commercials construct the image of ideal womanhood, sexy, intelligent, powerful, and like other ideal women.²⁴¹ This image is created from continuity between the situations and dialogue of the television show and the advertisements between these segments. Fears will be addressed in the course of a show; fear of failure, abandonment, rejection, unhappiness or exclusion. Then these same fears

²³⁹ Christine E. Crouse-Dick, 'She Designed: Deciphering Messages Targeting Women in Commercials Aired During *Ally McBeal*,' *Women and Language* (vol. xxv, no. 1), 18.

²⁴⁰ Robert Goldman, Deborah Heath and Sharon L. Smith, 'Commodity Feminism,' *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* (vol. 8 issue 3, 1991), 334-336.

²⁴¹ Crouse-Dick, 23-24.

are addressed in advertisements but with the simple provision of overcoming them through certain purchases.²⁴² The result is a postfeminist generation created by advertisers desirous of increased profits and easily guided television programmers. These two groups collaborate to produce shows portraying women in a certain light in hopes that such an image will cause viewers to spend more money. The implications of such a charge are disturbing at best but also lead to the question of whether media dictate popular culture or reflect it. If there is an increased number of shows portraying women at home as mothers is this because there is actually an increased number of women at home as mothers or because advertisers wish there to be? More mothers at home become a target audience with great spending power.

The idea of such a strategy, although troublesome, is not new. When women were touted as the focus of the 1996 presidential elections with “soccer moms” expected to provide the swing vote, news coverage was focused on women as consumers more than women as voters. The socioeconomic status and the products preferred by these women were explicit not only in news coverage itself, but especially in advertising. Minivans and other family-friendly vehicles were given prominence while companies such as Chevrolet that produce these vehicles found a soft spot for the U.S. Youth Soccer Association.²⁴³ The underlying assumption here, of course, is that consumer behavior and voter behavior can be equated one with the other and the danger is news shaped by the corporate world

²⁴² *ibid*, 26.

²⁴³ Mary Douglas Vavrus, *Postfeminist News: Political Women in Media Culture* (State University of New York Press: Albany, 2002), 120-122.

rather than news shaped by events. Targeted markets become the object of news, even electoral news rather than the object being the American citizenry.²⁴⁴

Critics claim that even the representation of feminism on television was largely a commercial scheme as advertisers discovered a highly desirable group of consumers; the new career woman. This woman was not only likely to be in charge of all or most household purchases, but also now had more disposable income than the previously targeted housewife. Thusly, advertisers demanded and producers produced shows that exemplified the experience of this “new woman.”²⁴⁵ As time continued, however, the construct morphed from feminist to postfeminist, the media image invented in order to sell more “stuff” to the perfect target group of women. Critics now claim that prime-time television programming is not the only genre to have fallen into this trap, but newsrooms themselves have become subject to the controlling whims of advertisers and the advertising companies that own the news stations.²⁴⁶ In essence, a corporate mind-set now dominates newsrooms across the country where news and entertainment departments are increasingly less separated and the programming of each less distinctive.²⁴⁷ Advertisers want a certain audience and want to influence this audience toward certain purchasing trends. In order for this to happen the programming must appeal to these individuals and if at all possible correspond with advertisements themselves.²⁴⁸ The

²⁴⁴ *ibid*, 123. The “soccer mom” phenomenon and the power of this group as voters and consumers are mentioned elsewhere including Maureen Dowd, *Are Men Necessary? When Sexes Collide* (G.P. Putnam’s Sons: New York, 2005), and Elinor Burkett, *The Baby Boon: How Family-Friendly America Cheats the Childless* (The Free Press: New York, 2000), 182.

²⁴⁵ Lauren Rabinovitz, ‘Ms.-Representation: The Politics of Feminist Sitcoms,’ in Mary Beth Haralovich and Lauren Rabinovitz, eds., *Television, History, and American Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 146.

²⁴⁶ Vavrus, *Postfeminist News*, 31-33.

²⁴⁷ *ibid*.

²⁴⁸ *ibid*, 33.

result is a media constructed postfeminist era where women either long to return to hearth and home or brave the public sphere where they are ignored, marginalized, or stuffed into a prefabricated media image.

In the postfeminist age presented by popular culture the image of women has taken an interesting turn. As evidenced by television programming, movies and even advertising, women have entered business and entrepreneurial realms only imagined by the earliest feminists and celebrated wholeheartedly by later feminists. But now the cost and ambiguity of this entrance is also being portrayed. That women desire a place in the dueling arenas of work and family is acknowledged and presented although often in glossy Hollywood fashion where the choices appear simpler than reality allows. What popular culture has done is highlighted the ambiguity of women's lives that is a central postfeminist theme. The stifling notions of romance, love and family discarded by feminism are once again being depicted because they still matter to women. The difference is that now these conventional longings are coupled with the desires that were ignored before the days of feminism. That is, the desire to make a meaningful contribution to society, to experience success in a chosen occupation, and to enter the public arena as an equal.

Postfeminist Theory

While popular culture is a compelling indicator of postfeminism that helps to establish what is entailed and advocated by this concept, it is not the only gauge. Like the other waves of feminism, postfeminism also has theoretical underpinnings. There are many factors that have led to the rise of postfeminism, most of which are societal. But postfeminist history is also constituted by theory. One such important theoretical concept

in the development of feminism and subsequently postfeminism is biological determinism. In the eyes of feminism, this term goes beyond saying that biology makes the traditional sexual division of labor inevitable to say that such division is proper, desirable, and even preferable.²⁴⁹ The second wave of feminism was an understandably harsh reaction to biological determinism and swung far enough to the opposite side as to begin at times declaring the complete lack of difference between the sexes, even biological difference. Postfeminism then, is an all too predictable reaction to this reaction that has embraced the idea of “unique equality” and all things feminine, a trend which will be further discussed. The crux of this new focus, however, is to accentuate femininity as a means of asserting power since the feminine is equal to the masculine even though it may look different.

Essentialism is another building block of postfeminism. It is much like biological determinism in that it is the idea that male and female identities are determined or fixed biologically, psychically, and socially.²⁵⁰ This implies the impossibility of change. The second wave of feminism was a reaction against this notion and began to espouse anti-essentialism. Feminists came to claim that gender and sexual differences are socially and historically rather than biologically constructed²⁵¹ and faulted patriarchy as the mode by which women are made to be the “other” on “a biological, psychic and social level”.²⁵² Eventually, within the decade of the 1980s, “an important shift happened, a shift explaining women’s subordination in terms of a single constraining system- whether we call it capitalism, patriarchy, biology, or even language- to focusing on the discursive,

²⁴⁹ Weiss, 36.

²⁵⁰ Phoca and Wright, 12.

²⁵¹ *ibid*, 69.

²⁵² *ibid*, 12.

material, and cultural differences that make up the being or becoming of women.”²⁵³ In other words, gender or sexual difference moved from being explained as a bridge or commonality between a group known as women (essentialist) to being recognized in the 1980s and ‘90s as being socially constructed. In much the same way as biological determinism, postfeminism has built upon the reaction of feminism to essentialism and started swinging the pendulum back toward the middle where women are encouraged to live in whatever manner they wish. In many cases this involves the dual embrace of both professional and domestic spheres.

Postfeminism has been described as the intersection of postmodernism, post-colonialism, post-structuralism, and feminism,²⁵⁴ making these “post” theories an additional part of its theoretical foundation. The result of this intersection is supposedly the formation of a new capacity to address feminist concerns such as patriarchy in non-hegemonic terms.²⁵⁵ Whether this is the case or not will be examined later. But a brief look at these different schools of thought is instructive. Postmodernism was discussed earlier and will not be reiterated here except to emphasize the postmodern reliance on moving beyond the idea of a known or attainable truth and replacing it with the contention that “the only ‘truth’ that matters is that individuals and cultures construct their own reality and truth”.²⁵⁶ This generates both the messiness inherent in postfeminism and its critiques of a monolithic, hegemonic feminism.

²⁵³ Kavka, xiii.

²⁵⁴ Brooks, 4.

²⁵⁵ *ibid.*

²⁵⁶ Robert Booth Fowler, *Enduring Liberalism: American Political Thought Since the 1960s* (University of Kansas Press: Lawrence, KS, 1999), 51.

Post-structuralism is closely related to postmodernism in its rejection of established truth.²⁵⁷ However, it focuses more closely on the role of language both in creating and reflecting meaning and in doing so shares the anti-essentialist goal of deconstructing unitary [human] subjectivity.²⁵⁸ In essence, because subjects are constructed through language and discourse, they are not whole and therefore cannot be solitary units of study. The feminine nature is an example of such a fragmented subject. But by utilizing the poststructuralist notion of the fragmented state of the feminine and the contradictions inherent in such a state, possibilities for choice emerge.²⁵⁹ The result is the groundwork for seeming postfeminist contradiction in both theory and practice. It is an open door for “messiness” in choices, what some would term diversity.

Post-colonial theory, or post-colonialism, shares with both postmodernism and post-structuralism a focus on how subjects are constituted, but in this case it is a concentration on Western and third world cultures and the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized.²⁶⁰ There is a good deal of debate about whether this theoretical position is useful in feminism.²⁶¹ Nonetheless, it has been employed to explain the plight of native women who have been rendered “mute” and “voiceless” in their double oppression.²⁶² The reason for both oppression and hegemony is tied

²⁵⁷ Sonya Andermahr, Terry Lovell, and Carol Wolkowitz, *A Glossary of Feminist Theory* (Arnold: London, 1997), 210.

²⁵⁸ Suzanna Danuta Walters, *Material Girls: Making Sense of Feminist Cultural Theory* (University of California Press: Berkeley, 1995), 175.

²⁵⁹ Chris Weedon, *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory* (Blackwell: Oxford, 1987), 125. Brooks discusses Weedon’s poststructuralist work in Chapter 1 of her book *Postfeminisms*.

²⁶⁰ Andermahr, et al., 204-205 cites Sally McWilliams, ‘Tsitsi Dangarembga’s *Nervous Condition*: At the crossroads of feminism and post-colonialism,’ *World Literature Written in English* (vol. 31, no. 1, 1991), 102-103.

²⁶¹ See Andermahr, 204-205 for a discussion about the usefulness, functionality and application of post-colonial theory as it relates to feminism, Black feminism, and third world feminism.

²⁶² Phoca and Wright, 112 discuss “Postcolonial or Subaltern Muteness” and the contributions of several theorists to this body of thought.

somewhat to language as a suppressed group is kept in subjection not through state means but rather through being convinced that the thinking of the ruling class is normal, natural and therefore correct. This causes the subjected group to accept its position rather than fight it and leads to the hegemonic dominance of one group over others.²⁶³ In keeping with the postfeminist view of essentialism, post-colonialism questions the possibility of a subject informed by a fixed identity since knowledge can only come through difference.²⁶⁴ The goal is the establishment of a voice for women and particularly third world women that is free of western and colonized influences. It is thought that only in this manner can the voiceless be accurately heard.²⁶⁵

A final step in postfeminist theory comes through a brief examination of the three authors frequently labeled postfeminist. Although none of these theorists claim to be postfeminist their writings are nonetheless thought to be representative of some of the main aspects of postfeminism, namely the reproof of victim feminism. The first of these, Camille Paglia, has been called a “thorn in the side of feminism”²⁶⁶ for good reason. Her highly sexualized writings are based on the premise that the true mystic power of female sexuality has been trapped by status quo feminism. Although it is “woman’s destiny to rule men”²⁶⁷ this cannot be done until the power and prowess of the tramp is embraced. This means altering naïve and prudish feminist views on a variety of sexual topics including rape, which under feminist definition covers “every unpleasant or embarrassing

²⁶³ *ibid.* Here Phoca and Wright discuss the theoretical contributions of Antonio Gramsci.

²⁶⁴ *ibid.*, 113.

²⁶⁵ This concept is frequently mentioned in post-colonial feminism discussions. A thorough discussion of this body of theory can be found in Brooks, Chapter 5.

²⁶⁶ Jennifer Wicke and Margaret Ferguson, “Introduction: Feminism and Postmodernism; or, The Way We Live Now,” in Margaret Ferguson and Jennifer Wicke, eds., *Feminism and Postmodernism* (Duke University Press: Durham, 1994), 7.

²⁶⁷ Camille Paglia, *Vamps & Tramps* (Vintage Books: New York, 1994), 80.

sexual encounter;”²⁶⁸ prostitution, which is the ultimate assertion of female power and should be encouraged rather than restricted; and the battered woman syndrome, which is actually a power play between genders where the woman is victorious and physically beaten only because the man knows no other way to fight the more powerful being.²⁶⁹

In each of these assertions, including her argument that abortion is an aggressive form of killing and extermination that should be kept unrestricted as a “sword of self-defense”²⁷⁰ against nature, Paglia is establishing the non-victim status of women even while she does so solely on the basis of biology.²⁷¹ Reaction to the perceived victim status of women is a cornerstone of postfeminism and one echoed by Katie Roiphe in her discussion of feminism on campus. Modern feminism offers rules rather than freedom while the fear of abuse from men is instilled through various feminist programs. As a result, women are turned into frightened victims rather than empowered free agents.²⁷² Similar to Paglia, Roiphe gives attention to the concept of rape, known as the “rape crisis” embodied in feminist efforts such as Take Back the Night marches. The problem for Roiphe is that the rape issue is couched in puritanical sexual terms complete with the sexual stereotypes of the aggressive male and helpless, hoodwinked female, as well as dictates of what proper sex should entail. Essentially what feminists are doing is creating

²⁶⁸ *ibid.*, 24.

²⁶⁹ *ibid.*, 43.

²⁷⁰ *ibid.*, 41.

²⁷¹ While maintaining the power of women sexually, Paglia discusses in her book *Sex, Art and American Culture* (Penguin Books: New York, 1992), that the lack of female contribution in the arenas of arts and academia is not due entirely to a lack of access to these venues, but that there is an intelligence difference between men and women.

²⁷² Katie Roiphe, *The Morning After: Sex, Fear, and Feminism on Campus* (Little, Brown and Company: Boston, 1993), 171-172.

a culture of victimhood and a proper definition of tender, equal, non-aggressive, non-domineering sex.²⁷³

Naomi Wolf, the third author frequently labeled postfeminist also levels charges of victimhood against feminism. She traces the two traditions of victim feminism and power feminism, even listing the characteristics of each. Power feminism, is “unapologetically sexual” and “tolerant of other women’s choices about sexuality,” it “hates sexism without hating men,” and acknowledges a woman’s quest for power, money and self fulfillment as natural and positive attributes that will eventually better society as well as other women.²⁷⁴ It is essentially a response to the victim identity of feminism where women are subjugated but rather than moving forward begin to personify their victim status. There is an effort to disprove claims of a feminine nature that is more nurturing and less violent than the masculine and a call to embrace the “bad girl” so that the dark side of femininity can be melded with the good side and true power can emerge.²⁷⁵ In postfeminist style, Wolf places an emphasis on the importance of the individual’s story in defining womanhood, femininity and what it means to become a woman.²⁷⁶

Conclusion

The power of female sexuality and a response against victim identity are the common themes running through the works of these authors. It is these stances that have

²⁷³ *ibid*, 51- 84. Roiphe veers from her otherwise labeled postfeminism in the final chapter of her book *Last Night in Paradise: Sex and Morals at the Century’s End* (Little, Brown and Company, Boston, 1997). Here she discusses the ambiguity and meaninglessness of the freedom bought by the sexual revolution. Its feverish concentration on moral relativism has led to life being centered on the physical act of sex.

²⁷⁴ Wolf, *Fire with Fire*, 137-138.

²⁷⁵ *ibid*, 228-232.

²⁷⁶ Naomi Wolf, *Promiscuities: The Secret Struggle for Womanhood* (Random House: New York, 1997), 233-234.

established them as postfeminist although this small definition of postfeminist thinking is in no way thoroughly descriptive of the concept. In the same way, the theoretical underpinnings of postfeminism are by no means representational of all aspects of the term. In fact, while theory provides a necessary foundation for examining postfeminism and outlines the history by which such a concept entered society, it does relatively little in contribution to an understanding of the idea. Comprehension comes most effectively through discussion of the issues surrounding and constituting postfeminism. These are the very same issues surrounding and constituting feminism, but the varying postfeminist take on each provides distinction to the concept of postfeminism and creates a vital step toward its definition.

Chapter 4: Postfeminist Issues

Victims and Reality

Postfeminism in the Camille Paglia, Katie Roiphe, Naomi Wolf genre has been referred to as “power feminism” or “babe feminism” and is an impassioned critique of the “victim feminism” perpetuated by the preceding generation.²⁷⁷ In fact, postfeminism generally addresses not only the issues of victimization, but also autonomy and responsibility. “Girl Power” as opposed to “Girl Crisis” is a central tenet of postfeminism and is expressed through both fashion and attitude.²⁷⁸ Victim feminism involves any number of variations on the theme of women as the constant and permanent underdogs of a patriarchal society, the doormats trampled by countless uncaring men. One serious charge in the victimization vein is what some have deemed “date rape hysteria” or inflation of numbers about date rape and sexual harassment in order to foster victim identity. Such identity can often lead to power as currently exemplified in American culture where there is power in “being the most oppressed.”²⁷⁹

Much of feminism’s energy has been toward a fierce denunciation of patriarchy. The problem with this stance toward patriarchy and thus men is that it has bypassed an entire generation of women who cannot identify with bitter cries against patriarchal chains. The result has been the production of the “victim mentality” and a subsequent postfeminism revolt. Younger women more often than not do not identify with patriarchy in the same way because they have always had the ability to vote, own property, inherit

²⁷⁷ Siegel, 64.

²⁷⁸ Kimberly Roberts, “Girls in Black and White: The Iconography of teenage girls in post-Feminist America,” (<http://www.people.virginia.edu/kjr4k/girl.html>).

²⁷⁹ Carolyn Sorisio, “A Tale of Two Feminisms: Power and Victimization in Contemporary Feminist Debate,” in Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake, eds., *Third Wave Agenda: Being feminist, doing feminism* (University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, 1997), 137.

fortunes, keep paychecks, buy cars, lease apartments, order credit cards, and keep jobs through pregnancy, complete with six weeks of maternity leave. This generation of females has been raised believing they could be fighter pilots, stay-at-home moms, doctors, beauticians, or businesswomen at their choosing. As such, there appears to be an increasing ambivalence toward feminism as more and more women who innately agree with many “feminist” ideals either reject the label of feminism entirely or claim feminism only to then qualify which portions are acceptable and which are not.²⁸⁰ The first postfeminism issue, then, is an attempt to forge a path to new and pertinent ground in order to appeal to women whose life circumstances are no longer described by second wave feminism.

Feminists counter the victimhood charge by claiming that victim feminism is not a true representation of feminism but rather a white female middle class attempt to overlook issues of race, class, and other cultural differences. As such, the cries against victim feminism are nothing more than a few white middle class women wanting to “claim victory before the struggle is over. They want to race into the (not quite) top echelon of society, grab the booty, and bask in their newfound power.”²⁸¹ Other feminists counter that in giving a name to the forces which continue to oppress, the word victim can be an articulation of strength in many instances. What critics call “victim feminism” is actually an activism which refuses victimhood.²⁸² The struggle for power in feminism, whether expressed through claims of female suppression or supremacy is seen nowhere

²⁸⁰ Pamela Aronson, ‘Feminists or “Postfeminists?” Young Women’s Attitudes toward Feminism and Gender Relations,’ *Gender & Society*, (vol. 17, no. 6, December 2003), 912.

²⁸¹ *ibid*, 146.

²⁸² Siegel, 76.

more clearly than in the workplace and the ensuing effort to balance every other area of life.

Work and Equality

The topic of balancing work and family is everywhere from books and magazine articles to talk shows and advice columns. In essence, the trials of working and raising a family are paramount to women and this is becoming increasingly evident. A recent survey noted that one in four working mothers are unhappy with the balance they have struck between work and home, while fifty-two percent claim that more time with their children is worth a pay cut.²⁸³ Twenty-six percent of the mothers interviewed claimed that relationships with their children were negatively affected by their jobs, but fifty percent also believed that the flexible work arrangements offered by their organizations did not adversely affect their career movement.²⁸⁴

The potential pitfall is that the many options open to women in the current postfeminist era are often viewed as expectations rather than possible paths. The result of this is a crisis of identity, where young women in modern culture have very little self assurance and instead of progressing in life, stall and fail to reach potential.²⁸⁵ A “cultural schizophrenia of mutually exclusive expectations”²⁸⁶ has resulted and the pressure on women is enormous. While a few decades ago the major goal of femininity was marriage and children, added to these are now financial independence, career choice, social lives, and geographical location. In addition, these are to be decided with no roadmap. In such

²⁸³ Mary Delaney, “Survey: Working Moms Want the Gift of Time,” *AOL.com* (June 5, 2006).

²⁸⁴ *ibid.*

²⁸⁵ Victoria C. Dickerson, ‘Young Women Struggling for an Identity,’ *Family Process* (vol. 43, issue 3, September 2004), 337.

²⁸⁶ Michele Kremen Bolton, *The Third Shift: Managing Hard Choices in Our Careers, Homes, and Lives as Women* (Jossey-Bass Inc.: San Francisco, 2000), 32-33.

circumstances, postfeminism may correctly be interpreted as advancement in the options and choices open to women coupled with an increase in ambiguity about how these roles are to be filled. This is new territory for women and the result is often a sense of failure and fatigue.²⁸⁷ This “Superwoman syndrome,”²⁸⁸ however, is not a new phenomenon but has been a topic of discussion for several decades. It is addressed in Betty Friedan’s *The Second Stage*, as the undesirable result of false feminist claims to “having it all.”²⁸⁹

The “superwoman” persona is a puzzle for feminism because the superwoman herself is simultaneously admired and vilified. She is the embodiment of the goals of women and yet she is often portrayed as “deranged” and someone best to be avoided.²⁹⁰ Postfeminism, then, is thought to be a response as well to the “superwoman” syndrome that has gripped women for the past several decades²⁹¹ because its embrace of multiplicity may relieve some of the pressure to do everything at once. Here, once again, there appears to be a dichotomy between feminist ages on the subject of choices. While younger feminists often see feminism as the realization of true desires and goals whether these goals include homemaking and motherhood or exiting the home each morning on the way to a dream career, second wave or older feminists often view this conception as flawed. The reason for this is that they believe these desires may come from a source

²⁸⁷ Dickerson, 338.

²⁸⁸ Brooks, 3. The biological clock issue is a current concern as noted by literature such as Sylvia Ann Hewlett’s *A Lesser Life*, as well as numerous talk shows. This topic centers around the dilemma of women who focus on a career only to discover that when they are ready to have children they are unable as well as the dilemma of women who are worn out from trying to have it all at once.

²⁸⁹ Friedan, *The Second Stage*. This book was written to address the issue of family as it was missed by the women’s movement.

²⁹⁰ See Charlotte Brunsdon, ‘Feminism, Postfeminism, Martha, Martha, and Nigella,’ *Cinema Journal* (vol. 44, no.2, 2005), for a discussion of how the modern “domestic goddess” declares the ease of her accomplishments without needing to be overwrought or angry about domestic tasks. This is just one example of an odd range of behaviors displayed by television personality women who appear to embody the ideal “superwoman”.

²⁹¹ Brooks, 3.

outside of the individual longing for them.²⁹² In other words, such desires may be socially constructed by a culture steeped in patriarchy and the idolization of all things male. If this is the case and “individual choices are socially shaped and socially constrained” as the Women’s Movement was stoutly convinced of, then there becomes a distinct and likely possibility that one’s choices are really not one’s own.²⁹³ Nonetheless, regardless of personal ideals for the division of labor, the idea that equality between men and women “can come about *only* through similar life courses and a parallel allocation of labor may constitute an abstraction by which few people actually want to live.”²⁹⁴

Women with traditionally “feminine” interests and occupations have been somewhat problematic for feminism as well. And, there is always the question of why this has not significantly changed over the years. For instance, columnist Maureen Dowd chronicles the absence of “alpha” women, or those women who displayed a great deal of social cunning and maneuvering in school, from the public sphere. There are a few notable exceptions, but overall, alpha women marry alpha men and retreat to the home to raise alpha children. Those alpha women that do remain are often shoved out of the corporate lineup by co-conspiring alpha male competitors.²⁹⁵ But then, traditional may be traditional because it encompasses on some level the true desires of women. The fact that

²⁹² Katha Pollitt and Jennifer Baumgardner, ‘Afterward: A Correspondence between Katha Pollitt and Jennifer Baumgardner,’ in Rory Dicker and Alison Piepmeier, eds., *Catching a Wave: Reclaiming Feminism for the 21st Century* (Northeastern University Press: Boston, 2003), 316-317.

²⁹³ *ibid*, 317. This of course, sounds disturbingly like pre-reformation days when an individual was unqualified to understand the Holy and had to grasp this discernment through the gracious consent of priests. It implies that there is some form of genuine feminism that apparently some women are not capable of grasping without the generous guidance of enlightened and liberated others. Ironically, in this line of thinking aborting one’s baby from the womb is considered feminist while welcoming one’s baby from the womb and then caring for her at home is often viewed as non-feminist because such a decision could not possibly have been made free of any conscious or subconscious inducement.

²⁹⁴ Daphne de Marneffe, *maternal desire: On Children, Love, and the Inner Life* (Little, and Company: New York, 2004), 22.

²⁹⁵ Dowd, 102-106.

most women now work has been touted as reason to believe that traditional female roles are stifling. Studies show, however, that many of the women who work do so for necessity only and have lower satisfaction levels than women who are homemakers or work part-time.²⁹⁶

Perhaps postfeminism answers this question best in the words of journalist Caitlin Flanagan who states unapologetically that when discussion about work and motherhood take place, serious truths are often skirted. This is problematic because it doesn't help women. In reality, "what few will admit- because it is painful, because it reveals the unpleasant truth that life presents a series of choices, each of which precludes a host of other attractive possibilities- is that whichever decision a woman makes, she will lose something of incalculable value."²⁹⁷ As author Michele Kremen Bolton describes it, such reality checks shatter the myth of androgyny. "True androgyny- acting out both gender roles simultaneously- is a myth, rather than a reality for most women... Instead, it's all a question of trade-offs."²⁹⁸

While the fact that different life choices have their own sacrifices and repercussions is hardly revolutionary, what postfeminism adds to the discussion is an honest assessment of these ramifications. Women who stay home with their children each day have a different bond than mothers and children who are separated, while women who participate in the adult world appear to preserve more of "their former selves."²⁹⁹

Where feminism dictates which of these choices is preferable, postfeminism advocates

²⁹⁶ Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: the collapse and revival of American community* (Simon & Schuster New York, 2000), 200.

²⁹⁷ Caitlin Flanagan, *To Hell with All That: Loving and Loathing Our Inner Housewife* (Little, Brown and Company: New York, 2006), xx.

²⁹⁸ Bolton, 33.

²⁹⁹ Flanagan, xx-xxi.

the odd, messy and sometimes contradicting combination of either, neither or both of these options.

Unfortunately for women struggling with balancing these options, there is a vast difference between American feminism which focuses on attaining equality for women through legal, political, economic, and sexual frameworks of rights, and European feminism which focuses on setting up support systems to allow women to handle the dual burdens of home, work, and citizenship.³⁰⁰ Proponents of the European focus claim that if women are to be “equal” or exactly like men in the workplace, motherhood and resources such as maternity leave and childcare cannot be ignored.³⁰¹ But, this brings to light a fundamental component of postfeminism, one that examines whether equality between men and women must leave them indistinguishable. While this point is best addressed in the discussions of femininity and sexuality it must be noted that this conflict occurs frequently in the corporate and business worlds. Part of the dilemma faced by women is the identity challenge that comes from attempting to operate as “authentic women in a largely patriarchal society where male needs and definitions of success prevail and color the thoughts and behaviors of both sexes.”³⁰² In essence, being equal as women rather than as women attempting to be men is a postfeminist component.

Femininity and Masculinity

Gender equality has always been a focus of feminism, but it has never quite been decided what such equality looks like. Does it mean the disappearance of feminine and masculine traits because these are socially constructed falsehoods? Does it mean a

³⁰⁰ Janet Wolff, *Feminine Sentences: essays on women and culture* (Polity Press: Cambridge, 1990), 217.

³⁰¹ *ibid*, 227.

³⁰² Bolton, 7.

conspicuous display of traditionally accepted gender roles? Or could it possibly be mediation between these two extremes? The postfeminist defiance of victim feminism has touted itself in many ways, one of which has been its proud embrace of all things feminine. Society sends a clear message that it is not good to be a female and as such women today are left with two options; 1) pretend to be a man or 2) be feminine in a “desperate, victim-like way.”³⁰³ Postfeminism however, appears to defy this limited choice by its characteristic acceptance of contradictions and differences. Differences, especially the differences of the feminine from the masculine are embraced.³⁰⁴

Femininity, then, is an element that was missed by the women’s movement. While feminism had tremendous success in establishing the fact that women are equally human to men, along the way the fact that women are also women; that is uniquely feminine- has been lost. While lesbian feminism focuses on becoming a woman-identified woman, and even acknowledges the importance of non-lesbian female relationships, the focus is on breaking free from the constructed view of femininity. This essentially narrows the view of what is feminine to what this particular strand of feminism says it should be, i.e. nothing currently represented. Again, a younger generation of women who already enjoy the liberation of being female while pursuing a myriad of goals may not consider femininity as the foul state of being it was 40 years ago. In essence, femininity should be an option to women because women who feel trapped at the inability to reach their human potential will “suffer every bit as much when cut off from those aspects of life that are distinctly and uniquely female.”³⁰⁵

³⁰³ Aronson, 138.

³⁰⁴ Phoca, 52

³⁰⁵ Danielle Crittenden, *What Our Mothers Didn't Tell Us* (Simon & Schuster: New York, 1999), 22.

This is not to dismiss the countless examples of inequality that exist in the perception of the two genders. One such example is found in the music world with the rock star versus the pop star. These two icons reveal the inequalities imbedded in the “gender order” or the assumption that “there are two genders-male and female- each with a corresponding set of personality characteristics, desires, and embodied practices called masculinity and femininity.”³⁰⁶ While these are considered to compliment each other there is an implicit inequality about the gender order that causes the masculine to be esteemed above the feminine. Again, this is seen nowhere more clearly than the rock/pop division where rock and therefore rock musicians display the masculine characteristics of “rebelliousness, aggressiveness, and sexual promiscuity” while pop music and therefore pop stars are considered “less skilled, more conforming, more interested in fame and fortune...” or otherwise display the feminine characteristics of being “well-behaved, vain, [and] romantic.”³⁰⁷

The perpetuation of inequality has not just come from popular culture, but from elsewhere in society. Feminists note that;

social institutions have played different roles in promoting specific ideas about gender; some, for example, fundamentalist churches and conservative organizations such as the Family Research Council, are quite public and strident in their defense of a biologically determined gender hierarchy in which men are genetically programmed to dominate women.³⁰⁸

Some perpetuation of disparity has even come from within feminism itself, in theoretical form. The most prominent example of this is difference feminism, or the argument that

³⁰⁶ Mimi Schippers, ‘Rocking the Gender Order,’ in Rory Dicker and Alison Piepmeier, eds., *Catching a Wave: Reclaiming Feminism for the 21st Century* (Northeastern University Press: Boston, 2003), 282.

³⁰⁷ *ibid*, 283.

³⁰⁸ Mary Douglas Vavrus, *Postfeminist News: Political Women in Media Culture* (State University of New York Press: Albany, 2002), 13.

women have innate nurturing tendencies different from those of men, which is seen by many feminists as nothing more than an excuse to explain away the inequalities between men and women. Postfeminism's emphasis on the conflict between work and family tends to focus on gender differences but not as an indictment of feminism for overlooking these when women's entrance into the world of business and politics was emphasized. It is rather an indication that patriarchal forms of suppression and discrimination are still firmly in place,³⁰⁹ and that they are often dictated in terms of gender differences.

In spite of this, however, it would be false to claim the absence of hard evidence pointing to the existence of at least some feminine and masculine tendencies. For instance, women are markedly less likely to support military action than men. This is a historically substantiated fact and one that remained true even after 9/11. Feminists cite this as evidence of women's voices being ignored because mainstream media portrayed images of a united public in favor of a war effort,³¹⁰ and while it does indeed point to an overlooked gender gap in military issues it also points to an interestingly united female voice.

If women by and large are less likely to support military action, then they are thinking alike and differently from men. Could there possibly be something about women that makes them female? This perhaps sounds like ridiculous reasoning, but in light of attempts to dissolve male and female differences as being socially and culturally constructed it has become increasingly revolutionary to claim that women are inherently

³⁰⁹ Dow, 199. Dow notes this in conjunction with the examination of a book by Wendy Kaminer, *A Fearful Freedom: Women's Flight from Equality* (Addison-Wesley: Reading MA., 1990).

³¹⁰ Jennifer L. Pozner, "The 'Big Lie': False Feminist Death Syndrome, Profit, and the Media," in Rory Dicker and Alison Piepmeier, eds., *Catching a Wave: Reclaiming Feminism for the 21st Century* (Northeastern University Press: Boston, 2003), 38.

feminine and men are inherently masculine. This is despite the fact that such difference is further displayed in workforce interactions where men have been found to often focus on meeting goals and accomplishing tasks while women do this with more attention to the human component and relational aspects.³¹¹ How people feel then can become as important as what has been done. While this is not the desired standard in corporate America and is therefore often stifled by men and women alike, it does show an overarching operational difference between genders.

Nonetheless, such differences are often disregarded or disdained. In a discussion about feminism and male-identification, four feminists relayed their views on being male-identified and why they enjoy being so. The most poignant aspect of this transcription is that a large portion of the discussion centers on the clothing, hair and make-up of these women who for the most part shun being “feminine” in order to be real and powerful. The irony, of course, is that this attempt to break away from the dreaded aspects of femininity requires a great deal of attention to one’s appearance. These women don’t wear make-up and rarely display other “feminine” signifiers, but at the same time do so with the utmost consciousness. Is this a defeat of their very purpose? If women are supposed to be “male-identified” should this not come naturally and without the hype of constantly assessing how one’s personal appearance and hygiene particulars affect the views of others? Each woman also notes that her conscious attempt to become male-identified is a result of early failures at being feminine, or in other words a failure to measure up to someone else’s standard of physical beauty. That this even affected them is

³¹¹ Bolton, 7 and 36.

an interesting commentary on the uniquely feminine desire to be beautiful and appealing.³¹²

And so the attention inevitably turns to the topic of female sexuality. Sexuality and femininity are inexorably tied in any discussion of postfeminism because there has been a paradigm shift from loathing to embracing some aspects of femininity. However, the exponentially increased power of women over the past four decades has produced an odd side effect. Increased freedom from tradition has brought increased attraction “to the privileges and niceties of traditional womanhood.”³¹³ However, it has also brought an abandonment of many boundaries that historically dictated the behavior of and in regard to women. The oddity is that such obligations and restraints were what gave these privileges meaning so the result is that “society has now become obsessed with a drag queen ethos, in which femininity must be communicated by exaggeration and cartoon.”³¹⁴

Sexuality and Equality

From the beginning, sexuality and the female body have occupied a central part in feminism that persists today. The female body, on display throughout the ages, is still continually in the public view in nearly every possible capacity but now wears less, if any, clothing and appears to feel in control of this role. In many instances the revealed feminine body is viewed as having some sort of power, not only because it is female, but

³¹² See Ana Cox et al., “Masculinity without Men: Women Reconciling Feminism and Male-Identification,” in Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake, eds., *Third Wave Agenda: Being feminist, doing feminism* (University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, 1997), 178 for the start of this discussion. See also Mandle’s discussion on convincing women’s studies students that outside appearance, hairstyle, makeup, skirt length, and heel height are not proper or accurate determinants of feminist adherents, 94-98.

³¹³ Flanagan, xix.

³¹⁴ *ibid.*

because its display is approved and promoted by some women. As Kathryn Hausbeck describes it;

Sexuality as commodity, as objectified and passive femininity, and as radical reclamation [*sic*] of the female body and the active, independent woman: all of these are sutured together into the postfeminist equivalent of the 19th century Anatomical Venus. ‘Woman’ is opened, uncovered, viewed, but a century later, she stares back, she is the physician holding the knife, and she is the artist/photographer capturing the image.³¹⁵

The concern, of course, is that the combined forces of pop culture and Hollywood celebrities will convey irrevocably to young girls that “appearance is the only source of female power.”³¹⁶ This concern is well founded considering the stances of modern theorists such as Camille Paglia, who asserts among other things, that women are the more powerful gender because of their sexuality and that men are less powerful because of their unabated desire for the female body.³¹⁷ In essence, women are to relish their “cosmic” sexual power over men and feminists are to stop hiding the truth about such power from young women.³¹⁸ On the other hand, the last century closed out with concerns about the “grrrl” movement, or girl power as it related to teen and pre-teen girls. The apprehension flowed from the statistics showing that girls are more likely than ever to define themselves in terms of outward appearance with a large percentage ready to change their looks or body before anything else.³¹⁹ These statistics could point toward the dark side of embracing femininity packaged by popular culture.

³¹⁵ Hausbeck, 157.

³¹⁶ Nadya Labi, ‘For the next generation, feminism is being sold as glitz and image, But what do girls really want?’ *Time Magazine* (vol. 151, no. 25, June 29, 1998), 62.

³¹⁷ Paglia, 52.

³¹⁸ *ibid*, 49.

³¹⁹ Labi, 62.

Traditional feminism conveys that in order to be equal to men it is necessary to be the same in every respect and at the same time encourages women to embrace inhibition, be “naughty” because to be otherwise is to be repressed and dominated. The result is a society full of unhappy women who are unable to adjust to the dual yet incompatible roles demanded of them.³²⁰ Equality, therefore, has come to center a great deal around sexuality. Feminists originally reacted against biological determinism and the idea that women are lesser because of their biological functions. The pendulum has swung to the other side and come to bitterly attack heterosexuality, the “most popular model of sexuality” which “demands male control over women, thus using sexuality to help keep women in their second-class seats.”³²¹ The fringe elements of this group have withdrawn for completely political purposes and have claimed lesbianism as a continuum, enveloping more than just sexual activity. In this process however, many radical feminists have denounced heterosexual relationships as oppressive in every way, even at times claiming the heterosexual woman as an enemy.³²²

More than this, however, is the extreme emphasis placed on the absence of sexual differences between men and women. Discussions of the “slut within” and “bad girls,”³²³ has done little to improve the political or social standing of women. Yet traditional forms of behavior between the sexes have been dismissed as archaic.³²⁴ The resulting dilemma is disturbing. Even the use of the female body in political or other protests has often gone

³²⁰ Wendy Shalit, *A Return to Modesty* (The Free Press: New York, 1999), 11.

³²¹ Weiss, 19.

³²² Valerie Bryson, *Feminist Political Theory* (Macmillan Press: London, 1992), 214.

³²³ A great deal of feminist and supposed postfeminist literature concentrates on sexual inhibition as a key to women’s freedom. By behaving in a similar sexual manner to men, women are thought to be able to achieve equality.

³²⁴ A myriad of feminist writers have denounced traditional forms of male/female interaction including marriage and family as archaic. One example is Reed, *Problems of Women’s Liberation*, 49-57.

awry because of the cultural image of women's bodies. The female body is a sex symbol and an object of male desire. Using it to protest, then, often results in nothing more than diversion from the original political intent by relegating the protesting women to their previous sex-object status.³²⁵ "Bare all" political tactics have not worked in promoting sexual equality and neither have attempts to urge women to act as men. At the same time, postfeminism's embrace of the feminine will eventually and inevitably lead down the terrifyingly traditional path of sexual difference.

There is an odd dichotomy when it comes to how postfeminism views feminism and its part in the sexual revolution. On one hand, feminism is seen as prudish and controlling, a kind of schoolmarm policing the sexual desires of women.³²⁶ But on the other hand, the sexual politics of feminism are employed frequently by modern feminists who are disturbed by the results of this campaign. "The free-love idea that sex could be casual and safe and un-fraught was, in retrospect, chuckleheaded."³²⁷ Free-love is in essence the easy hard way out. It is cowardly because it allows people to remain undisclosed to one another and it is at the same time more difficult because it leaves inexperienced the deep realms of intimacy that allow for freedom in romantic love.³²⁸ As Danielle Crittenden put it, "The sexual revolution, from a male point of view, could be summed up as, "You mean I get to do whatever I want-and then leave? Great!"³²⁹

³²⁵ Wolff, 121.

³²⁶ This is a frequent complaint leveled against feminism particularly by third wave feminists. Paglia is an obvious example of the distain felt by some, but milder complaints come from authors such as Joan Mandle who notes the policing nature of feminism in women's studies programs.

³²⁷ Dowd, 10.

³²⁸ *ibid.* Dowd quotes Leon Wieseltier, editor of the *New Republic* to this affect. He calls the bedroom the "front line, the foxhole" where "people who live otherwise safe lives can learn how cowardly or courageous they are...".

³²⁹ Crittenden, *What Our Mothers Didn't Tell Us*, 35.

These newer criticisms are the embodiment of some of the original dissents of the free love notion whose authors had a suspicion that

in transferring its approval from women's chaste resistance to sex to their full acceptance of it, then, society had merely reversed the terms of women's dependence on the good opinion of men. Any liberation attached to the sexual revolution had not been theirs but that of their age-old oppressor. The price he had to pay for this bountiful new supply of 'goods' was that now he must agree to accept it in a somewhat shopworn condition.³³⁰

Betty Friedan is a noteworthy parallel to this dichotomy between the forces within feminism because although one of the most continuous and recognizable feminist voices she still has the unfortunate position of representing the great clash of opinions over sexual politics. From the beginning she has been a mediating voice in the women's movement, even from within NOW where she was seen as too conservative at the same time she was seen as too liberal. She discusses in her book *Life So Far* the dismay she often felt at the fringe elements of the women's movement that sought to make the theme of the women's liberation lesbianism or man-hating. According to her, the women's movement is supposed to be about the real lives of women rather than a battle of the sexes. Sexual politics only diverted attention away from the real issues of equal employment opportunities, education, autonomy and child care.³³¹

Friedan's opinion of feminist sexual politics may come in part from the result of NOW's strong stances on women's sexual "freedom." The group was the primary leader in the women's movement but when it adopted a resolution at the 1971 convention to support lesbians legally and morally, it had the effect of disengaging many mainstream

³³⁰ Midge Decter, *The New Chastity and Other Arguments Against Women's Liberation* (Coward, McCann & Geoghegan: New York, 1972), 65.

³³¹ Betty Friedan, *Life So Far* (Simon & Schuster: New York, 2000), 231-233.

women from the movement.³³² This declaration did not resound with many women who certainly wanted equal pay, but did not wish to abandon their lives with men and family. Some trace the condition of feminism today back to this influx of radical ideas into both NOW as well as feminism itself because these had the general effect of relegating it to the realm of the inconsequential for many women.³³³

Feminist sexual politics today continues a strong focus on lesbian rights as well as abortion rights, both of which have become essential to mainstream feminism. However, sexual politics has also come to encompass more peculiar forms of expression, including what has become known as transfeminism. Transfeminism is a term used to describe the feminist struggle of “those individuals who identify, present, or live more or less as women despite their sex assignment at birth.”³³⁴ These “feminists” assert the principles that “each individual has the right to define her or his own identity and to expect society to respect it,” that “no political, medical, or religious authority shall violate the integrity” of bodies nor impede decisions about what activities they are engaged in, and that “nobody shall be coerced into or out of personal decisions regarding her or his gender identity or expression...” In essence, “trans people feel dissatisfied with the sex assigned to them without their consent according to simplistic medical standards”³³⁵ and so such categorization is simply abandoned. “Transfeminism views any method of assigning sex

³³² Klein, *Undressing Feminism*, 73-74

³³³ *ibid.*

³³⁴ Emi Koyama, “The Transfeminist Manifesto,” in Rory Dicker and Alison Piepmeier, eds., *Catching a Wave: Reclaiming Feminism for the 21st Century* (Northeastern University Press: Boston, 2003) 245.

³³⁵ *ibid.*, 245-246.

as socially and politically constructed, and advocates a social arrangement in which one is free to assign her or his own sex (or non-sex, for that matter).”³³⁶

Sexual politics can become increasingly fuzzy and ambiguous when melded with party politics. For instance, the feminist recrimination of “you just don’t get it” leveled at the good old boy Senate establishment during the Thomas-Hill hearings changed to “everybody does it” during the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal.³³⁷ Postfeminism, then, is thought to be a response to the confusion, uncertainty, and negativity of feminist sexual politics because it embraces equality for women in the public sphere while simultaneously rejecting the sexual politics of feminism.³³⁸ Critics note that sexual politics, or feminism’s attempts to fight the inequality and subordination of women in the areas of gender and sexuality,³³⁹ have been drowned out in the postfeminist worship of all things maternal and heterosexual.³⁴⁰ This is a common criticism of postfeminism that inadvertently points to a larger trend. Regardless of any manifestos stating otherwise, marriage, men and family appear to matter to women and are therefore an important focus of postfeminism.

Marriage, Men and Family

The role of men in the lives of women is pertinent to any discussion of postfeminism particularly since much of the hesitancy on the part of women to identify

³³⁶ *ibid*, 250.

³³⁷ Dowd, 291. These hearings were held during the Senate’s process of confirming Clarence Thomas to the Supreme Court. Anita Hill accused him of sexual harassment and this “trial” of sorts was to determine the truth of the accusations and whether Thomas was fit for the Court appointment.

³³⁸ Dow, 88.

³³⁹ This definition is given in Judith Stacey’s 1983 article ‘The New Conservative Feminism,’ *Feminist Studies* (vol. 9, 1983), 559-584.

³⁴⁰ Dow, 91.

with feminism is a concern about alienating men.³⁴¹ Postfeminism appears to be more “heterosexist” and has an interest in carving a role for men as “lovers, husbands and fathers as well as friends.”³⁴² In addition, the role of men in families in a necessary study, particularly since recent trends show that the family is changing yet again. Women are now having more children than they did even 15 years ago and many are choosing to drop careers or work part time in order to raise them. This increase in numbers is seen by some as an indication of a drastic shift in attitudes toward careers and families.³⁴³ While the choice for second wave women in having families appears to have been no family or a very small one, younger women appear to see a far lesser dichotomy between motherhood and work. In fact, this trend is steady enough to have major news outlets such as *USA Today* noting that

In this post-feminist era, women who are educated and in good jobs are not afraid to lose their professional standing if they have children. They take it as a given that they can have both. Rather than delay childbirth or opt for smaller families, they’re prepared to juggle the two, delay the launch of careers or take a break from successful jobs. Some who quit work view motherhood as a second career and envision starting a third when they’re ready to return to work.³⁴⁴

A great deal of postfeminist discussion naturally centers on relations between the genders but unlike the second wave, it tends to tout the harmony between these groups rather than the discord. Postfeminism, in essence appears to signify “a cease-fire in yesteryear’s battle between the sexes.”³⁴⁵ However, feminists claim that this is the case because postfeminism does not require men to change. Since the sexual politics of

³⁴¹ Aronson, 909-913.

³⁴² Gamble, 43.

³⁴³ Haya El Nasser, ‘For more parents, 3 Kids are a charm,’ *USA Today* (March 3, 2004, <http://usatoday.com/>).

³⁴⁴ *ibid.*

³⁴⁵ Press, 45.

feminism have been discarded everything in a woman's life becomes about individual choice rather than a struggle against a suppressor (patriarchy). Individuals are different and make different choices and these are what affect their lives rather than an outside force. Since the burden is then on women and their choices rather than the behavior of men or their participation in a society that systematically excludes women, they are off the hook.³⁴⁶

Much of the focus on women in postfeminism is intertwined with the environments of individual women. This, for instance, makes the family or a marriage as much of a focal point as a workplace. Once again, however, the attention given to women as individuals and particularly these women in traditional roles is difficult for feminists to tolerate. The complaint is that "postfeminist images of women highlight a traditional nuclear family, in which women perform a traditionally feminine nurturing role."³⁴⁷ In addition, there is "almost no conflict between the sexes within the family" and even the pre-feminist female coconspirator days are over.³⁴⁸ But then there are millions of women in nuclear families and many of these women are choosing to have larger families than were common several decades ago. The fact that husbands carry more of the domestic burden has been noted as a reason for this. Women who are having children are by and large having more of them and with their new domestically conscious husbands to help, either balance careers or stay at home to raise them.³⁴⁹ Either way, larger families have led to a greater focus on family and the relationships therein; a renewed attention which

³⁴⁶ Dow, 95 & 103.

³⁴⁷ Press, 47.

³⁴⁸ *ibid*, 48. *I Love Lucy* depicts the coconspirator roles quite well with its continual focus on the crazy schemes of Lucy and Ethel, often at the expense of Ricky and sometimes Fred.

³⁴⁹ Nasser.

is not entirely welcomed. Feminists often take issues with the resurgence of “family values” because these are viewed as nothing but code for an insistence on the maintenance of a patriarchal power structure. The resurgence, it is argued, is an indication of the deep anxiety the patriarchal system feels at the emergence of strong and independent women in the areas of business and politics.³⁵⁰

Postfeminism still addresses the issues facing women in the workplace but it is different from feminism in its refusal to criticize the nuclear family.³⁵¹ Unfortunately, according to feminists, this undermines any attempt to confront the struggles women still have within the family. While most women carry most of the load at home once they return from work, this aspect is not seen on television. The postfeminist ideal family man has replaced the “prefeminist ideal family woman” prominent in the 1950s. These men spend a tremendous amount of time with their families, clean, cook, launder and otherwise share the household duties.³⁵² But it is, after all, just television; or is it?

Indeed, there has been a great deal of attention to the plight of women and the tremendous amount of domestic burden that falls on them as compared to their husbands.³⁵³ More recently, however, there has been a shift in focus toward the increased participation of men in the domestic realm. The stay-at-home dad has become a topic of discussion as more men, for a variety of reasons, are trading places with their wives and caring for home and children full time.³⁵⁴ While the numbers are still relatively small, the

³⁵⁰ Amelia Jones, ‘Postfeminism, Feminist Pleasures, and Embodied Theories of Art’, in Joanna Frueh, Cassandra L. Langer, and Arlene Raven, eds., *New Feminist Criticism: Art, Identity, Action* (IconEditions: New York, 1994), 18.

³⁵¹ Press, 43.

³⁵² *ibid.*, 45-46.

³⁵³ Arlie Russell Hochschild, *The Second Shift* (Avon: New York, 1989).

³⁵⁴ In a humorous account of trading places with his wife, Sports Illustrated editor Austin Murphy discusses joining the ranks of these “trophy husbands” who put their careers on hold for the sake of their families.

percentage of children living with stay-at-home dads has increased 70 percent since 1990.³⁵⁵ Fathers who parent at home full time whether from job lay-offs, a wife's accelerating career, or simply the desire to be more involved in family life are the most obvious aspect of this new domestic trend. However, numbers point to a change in many households even where the father or both parents work full time.

Overall, children appear to spend more time with their parents than 20 years ago even when both parents work full time.³⁵⁶ A recent survey of Generation X parents found that family time was more important than career advancement and quantity time with children more important than quality time. Dads were found to be blurring the line between work and family and becoming more involved in the daily lives of their children.³⁵⁷ In the arena of domestic duties, men also appear to be changing. It is estimated that the amount of time men spend on housework has doubled since the 1960s and that with the overall lessened amount of time that is spent on household chores, they are now responsible for roughly one-third of these duties.³⁵⁸

Still, the primary focus of the domestic role of men lies in their fathering. While feminism has sometimes questioned the need for fathers, recent fatherhood literature is based entirely on the premise of the necessity of fathers.³⁵⁹ And there is a great deal of it.

This apparent trend is significant enough to be noted by *Fortune Magazine* in its October 14, 2002 issue. See Austin Murphy, *How Tough Could It Be? The Trial and Errors of a Sportswriter Turned Stay-at-home Dad* (Henry Holt and Company: New York, 2004), 8-9.

³⁵⁵ Michelle Conlin, 'Look Who's Barefoot in the Kitchen,' *Business Week* September 17, 2001.

³⁵⁶ *ibid.* This is an estimated increase of 4 and six hours per week with mom and dad respectively.

³⁵⁷ Karen E. Klein, 'The ABC's of Selling to Generation X,' *Business Week* April 15, 2004. This was also the finding in Paula Kamen, , *Feminist Fatale: Voices from the "Twentysomething" Generation Explore the Future of the "Women's Movement"* (Donald I. Fine, Inc: New York, 1991), 152-153, when she interviewed young fathers about their parenting roles.

³⁵⁸ Conlin.

³⁵⁹ Judith Trowell and Alicia Etchegoyen, Susan Budd, ed., *The Importance of Fathers: A Psychoanalytic Re-evaluation* (Taylor & Francis Group: New York, 2002).

A look at the necessity of fathers shows their unique contribution to the emotional, intellectual and social growth of children. The play interaction is particularly important in childhood years and girls as well as boys find stability for their adult years from interaction with their fathers. Specifically, girls gain a sense of themselves and appreciation for their femininity from fathers.³⁶⁰ A particular focus in father literature is the issue of children without fathers. While “fatherlessness” is not a new problem for children, the cause in centuries and decades past was a result of death rather than abandonment from divorce and out-of-wedlock births. Studies have shown that children left fatherless by these more recent causes are far more negatively affected making the new trend of fatherlessness “a monumental setback in the history of childhood.”³⁶¹

In discussing the abdication of the father, it has been noted that tradition names two phases of development for children. The primary phase was directed by the mother who gave life and then cared for the child the first few years of life. The secondary phase, at least for male children was directed by the father who proceeded to guide him through a passage of initiation to adulthood. It was access to this second phase that gave male children advantage over female children because it was a door to a more complete and opportunistic life. The initiation of male children has slowly disappeared throughout time, but the differentiation of parental tasks remained until the twentieth century. In fact, the legacy of the twentieth century has left behind both the clear separation of parental tasks as well as a difference in possibilities between male and female children. However, this has not been done by opening up the second phase to daughters, but rather by

³⁶⁰ David Popenoe, ‘Life Without Father’ in Cynthia R. Daniels, Ed., *Lost Fathers: The Politics of Fatherlessness in America* (St. Martin’s Press: New York, 1998), 38-39.

³⁶¹ *ibid*, 34.

curtailing its existence altogether and turning the majority of attention toward the primary phase.³⁶² In essence, “in order to strip young males of anachronistic advantages in secondary development, one has not proceeded towards an equal level of socialization and initiation for daughters: one has taken it away from boys.”³⁶³

Claims about the problematic increase of fatherlessness and the adverse affects of this social shift are viewed from a feminist standpoint as falling solely within a conservative camp determined to lock men and women into gendered roles. Such views only serve to strengthen paternal rights which may in turn “conflict with the interests of women and children” by giving men the right to “contest for custody.”³⁶⁴ The implication here, of course, is that women are more capable of rearing children than men, an assertion of biological determinism unparalleled outside the enemy camp of father advocates. Nonetheless, the focus on fatherlessness is viewed by some as an attempt to steal center stage from feminism because it replaces the politics of motherhood with the politics of fatherhood. This shift and subsequent claims to the important and irreplaceable role of fathers is thusly labeled as nothing more than a “postfeminist echo of 1950’s ‘momism;’” a reinvigorated attack against the freedom of women from patriarchy in its varying forms.³⁶⁵

Patriarchal conspiracies aside, children with resident fathers have been found to be slightly better adjusted than those in separated families,³⁶⁶ while statistics for intact

³⁶² Luigi Zoja, *The Father: Historical, psychological and cultural perspectives* (Taylor & Francis Group: Philadelphia, 2001), 255.

³⁶³ *ibid.*, 255-256.

³⁶⁴ Judith Stacey, “Dada-ism in the 1990’s,” in Cynthia R. Daniels, ed., *Lost Fathers: The Politics of Fatherlessness in America* (St. Martin’s Press: New York, 1998), 60-61.

³⁶⁵ *ibid.*, 54-60.

³⁶⁶ Elaine Welsh et al., *‘Involved’ fathering and child well-being: Father’s involvement with secondary school age children* (Joseph Roundtree Foundation, National Children’s Bureau: London, 2004), viii.

families reveal that although there are overall fewer fathers, the ones that are members of these families are spending more time interacting with their children than at any time since such numbers have been kept.³⁶⁷ These trends in the domestic realm and fathering are very important for postfeminism because the family and relations between men and women are paramount. In keeping with this, motherhood and the act of mothering are receiving an increasing amount of attention as well. While second wave feminism often downplayed the role and importance of motherhood, postfeminism both embraces and analyzes it.

Women and Motherhood

The role of mother has been deified throughout history but its image has often taken a less positive position in the world of feminism.³⁶⁸ In fact, motherhood has always been a difficult subject for feminism because of its contradicting meanings and implications for women. The gamut is vast for theories of motherhood and thereby encompasses everything from indentured servitude to empowerment. The crux of the problem lies with the theoretical underpinnings of feminism itself. There is a dichotomy here that spills over into the topic of motherhood. Feminism is based largely on individualism as a way to require that women be viewed as human subjects but it also denies the “significance of embodiment.”³⁶⁹ In other words, there is little or no acknowledgement of the differences women experience when most of them actually become mothers. However, this recognition of individual accounts of mothering is also

³⁶⁷ Katherine Ellison, *The Mommy Brain: How Motherhood Makes Us Smarter* (Basic Books: New York, 2005), 146.

³⁶⁸ Lauri Umansky argues in *Motherhood Reconsidered: Feminism and the Legacies of the Sixties* (New York University Press: New York, 1996), 16, that the negative feminist legacy of motherhood was exaggerated and that feminists with few exceptions have always been pro-motherhood.

³⁶⁹ Patrice DiQuinzio, *The Impossibility of Motherhood: feminism, individualism, and the problem of mothering* (Routledge: New York, 1999), 67.

dangerous for feminist theory because it is based on differences and thus becomes alarmingly entangled with “essential mothering” or the theory that motherhood is “natural and inevitable,” that a woman’s psychological and emotional health is inexorably connected with motherhood, and that sexual activity and pleasure are “means to motherhood” rather than an “end in themselves.”³⁷⁰

Essentially, there is an impossibility to motherhood in that focusing on differences between women as mothers does not take into account how much of the differences in women are a result of male dominance or subjectivity. However, it is at the same time a necessary undertaking because it allows for a theory of motherhood that does not dismiss or devalue mothering altogether.³⁷¹ Here again, the clash of feminist theoretical underpinnings creates a difficulty. The impossibility of motherhood is “the impossibility of being a mother as essential motherhood specifies motherhood and the impossibility of being both a mother and a political subject as individualism defines subjectivity [*sic*]...”³⁷²

This maternal quandary is not necessarily new as women have surely felt the tug of motherhood versus feminism for decades while others have found a path that seemingly joins the two. However, recent years have produced awareness that the second wave tendency to relegate motherhood to the irrelevant and mundane was not only shortsighted but detrimental. While the recognition that many, many women wish to have children has replaced or at least joined older notions that bearing children is the root of female oppression, the ensuing discussion of mothering centers almost entirely around

³⁷⁰ *ibid*, xiii.

³⁷¹ *ibid*, 69-70.

³⁷² *ibid*, 251.

having children but rarely about caring for them. How little time can be spent with children without causing them harm is a far more recognizable topic than an address of “quantity time” and the experience of spending hours and days with children because of a desire to do so.³⁷³

Caring for children has been ignored because it is both feared and undervalued.³⁷⁴

While women today have entered the public domain in large numbers, the lack they experienced before this entrance is now ascribed to the mother who is also the primary caregiver. In essence, “there is an intransigent insistence that something is lacking in women who spend their time mothering” and this has been promulgated by rhetoric that equates mothering “as antithetical to self.”³⁷⁵ “The critical issue that has eluded theory and social debate is that caring for young children is something mothers often view as extraordinarily important both for their children *and* for themselves.”³⁷⁶

At its most extreme, the negative view of motherhood can best be summarized with the belief that

A woman who stays at home caring for children and the house often leads an extremely sterile existence. She must lead her entire life as a satellite to her mate. He goes out into society and brings back a little piece of the world for her. His interests and understanding of the world become her own and she cannot develop herself as an individual, having been reduced to a biological function. This kind of woman leads a parasitic existence that can aptly be described as “legalized prostitution.”³⁷⁷

This is, of course, an impressively fanatical picture of motherhood not likely to describe the experience of many American mothers. Nonetheless, the negativity associated with

³⁷³ De Marneffe, xi-xii.

³⁷⁴ Ann Crittenden discusses the devaluing of caring for children in her book *The Price of Motherhood: Why the Most Important Job in the World is Still the Least Valued* (Metropolitan Books: New York, 2001).

³⁷⁵ *ibid*, xii.

³⁷⁶ *ibid*, 20.

³⁷⁷ Beal, 441.

not only motherhood but parenthood still exists and increasingly comes from those without children. Parents are now called “breeders” by those unhappy with the perks of parenting on the job and the added burden to those without children as a result of these perks.³⁷⁸

In a somewhat bitter diatribe, author and professor Elinor Burkett claims the existence of a disparity between the governmental treatment of parents and non-parents. She notes the development of a voting gap between these two entities and asserts that much of the shift in political attention toward families is affirmative action,³⁷⁹ and claims that affirmative action for mothers has long been a subtle and hushed goal of feminism. In this view, “women’s right to choose work and family” is the rhetoric used while in reality the benefits formerly awarded to the male head-of-the-household are now awarded to parents as the government sets up “an affirmative action program for mothers” that shelters them “from the difficulties created by their own choices.”³⁸⁰ By advocating the “right” of women to choose careers and motherhood through policy action pro-family supporters force another segment of the population to pay for these benefits. In this case, the benefits are being taken from those without children and given to those with children in an odd form of affirmative action. This is or should be problematic for feminism, according to some feminists, because it ties privilege to biology rather than keeping a goal of equality as the primary target. “Feminism has become the ladies’ auxiliary of the

³⁷⁸ Burkett, 39.

³⁷⁹ *ibid*, 18-21. Ironically, one of Burkett’s complaints is about having to pay for the education of other people’s children (11) and this despite the fact that she is a college professor making her living (not shoddily one would imagine) by educating other people’s children.

³⁸⁰ *ibid*, 173.

parents' rights movement, and the words woman and mother have become synonymous, once again.”³⁸¹

On the other end of the spectrum is an idolization of motherhood that caused problems for women at the beginning of the suffrage movement and takes a similar but more subtle form today. “Republican Motherhood” or the notion of women as moral authorities with the influence of passing the values of liberty and equality to children was a bulwark of women’s rights that mobilized women into action against slavery and eventually gender inequality.³⁸² However, this noble view of women also led to the duality of womanhood where women were esteemed as moral pillars and yet despised and excluded in other ways. For example, they were “too moral” to be sullied by politics.³⁸³ While this blatant form of venerated motherhood is not promoted today in the same terms, it has been modernized, polished, packaged and sold to a new generation.

The modern package comes with the title “new momism” and carries some hefty requirements. It is, in essence, “the insistence that no woman is truly complete or fulfilled unless she has kids, that women remain the best primary caretakers of children, and that to be a remotely decent mother, a woman has to devote her entire physical, psychological, emotional , and intellectual being, 24/7, to her children.”³⁸⁴ The new requirements are both romanticized and demanding and form a “view of motherhood in which the standards of success are impossible to meet.”³⁸⁵ The new momism encompasses the “ideals, norms, and practices” promulgated mostly by mass media that

³⁸¹ *ibid.*, 174.

³⁸² Marilley, 21.

³⁸³ Both Suzanne M. Marilley and Jean V. Matthews discuss in depth the cultural mindsets and social conditions that led to the rise of feminism.

³⁸⁴ Susan J. Douglas and Meredith W. Michaels, *The Mommy Myth: The Idealization of Motherhood and How It Has Undermined Women* (Free Press: New York, 2004), 4.

³⁸⁵ *ibid.*

present an unattainable perfection and constant ecstasy in motherhood. It is a newer and polished but warped version of Friedan's feminine mystique because while it encompasses many of the tenets of feminism, it still places the worth of a woman in her capacity to bear (or otherwise acquire) children and delegates to her the primary responsibility for caring and nurturing these children. And, insists that this should be done with perpetual and cheery self sacrifice.³⁸⁶

Besides media influence, the new momism appears to be the resulting culmination of a number of factors, including the determined overachieving work ethic of female boomers carried into parenting, the lack of government funding for daycare and public schools, the ruthless and hateful Republican Party under the dictatorship of Ronald Reagan, and most importantly the discovery of the market available in working mothers.³⁸⁷ The result is the perpetuation of the flawless mother. If the struggle for women 40 years ago was to break away from the ideal "all-giving, self-sacrificing" mother, the struggle for women currently is to break out of the "supermom" mode that requires near perfection on each of the increasing fronts for which women are responsible. Jobs, marriages, homes, health, children, relationships, and finances must be balanced with ceaseless and unwavering accuracy and precision in order for a woman to "have it all" without sacrificing anything,³⁸⁸ except perhaps sanity. At the same time others claim a coexisting societal judgment pronounced over childless women, to include

³⁸⁶ *ibid*, 4-5.

³⁸⁷ *ibid*, 9-11.

³⁸⁸ De Marneffe, 10-12. Friedan speaks about the "superwoman" tendency in her book *The Second Stage* and how it has left women tired and discouraged.

childless, unmarried and/or professional women that has only recently begun to be alleviated.³⁸⁹

And so, motherhood remains troubling, not only for feminist theory or simply for the societal philosophies influenced by feminist theory, but also for the spheres of economics and politics. Charlotte Perkins Gilman has been called the best-known feminist writer at the turn of the century and while she spent a great deal of effort developing a woman-friendly version of evolution, she is equally remembered for her assertions about motherhood. She claimed that the future of feminism and thus the determinant of how the woman question would be answered rested not with the emancipated woman, but with mothers. The real issue was not political, as in women having the right to vote, but rather economic. As long as most women continued to marry and have children (and they would) women would continue to remain dependent on men financially and any real independence or advancement would remain an illusion.³⁹⁰ Thus, the servitude thought to be produced by motherhood is really more a function of economic dependence than the actual task of mothering.³⁹¹

There is a tricky relationship between motherhood and capitalism because the individualistic concept of owning one's body becomes difficult when this body produces a child. This is due to the fact that while children are highly valued by those who long to "have" children, this does not necessarily imply ownership. However, since capitalism is based on the exchange of goods and services, market values, and supply and demand, the

³⁸⁹ Negra, 11. Negra claims that the hit television drama "Sex and the City" helped relieve this negative pronouncement over "non-traditional" professional women.

³⁹⁰ Matthews, 84.

³⁹¹ Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *Women and Economics* (Small, Maynard and Company: Boston, 1898), 43-50.

process of supplying babies to those who wish to have them but cannot birth them has become a capitalistic venture. Motherhood is not valued in any practical sense except that mothers' bodies produce children, or rather those individuals who the combined forces of patriarchy, capitalism, and technology are changing into commodities.³⁹²

The Industrial Revolution began the separation of spheres for men and women as men made their way into the marketplace in order to provide for their families and women stayed behind at home suddenly consumed more with child care and domesticity than raw survival. Historians cite this as a mixed outcome for women, equal part opportunity and entrapment. However, in keeping with capitalistic tradition, feminist analysis of these historical events is focused almost entirely on the absence of meaningful work in the home once men left to enter the public marketplace. Meaningful work, more often than not, is paid work and motherhood does not fall under this category. The focus is solely on the loss to women who were forced into the drudgery of child care to the exclusion of any focus on women who had previously been forced into the drudgery of survival work that left them no time to care for children. There is, essentially, no mention of the pleasure of raising children.³⁹³ Time with children is often framed as the drudgery left to women, a deficiency that can be cured by shared parenting duties or quality daycare. But what is not examined is the possibility that women want to be with their children, may need assistance figuring out how to do this more, and might miss their children when away from them.³⁹⁴

³⁹² Barbara Katz Rothman, "Motherhood Under Capitalism", in Janelle S. Taylor, Linda L. Layne and Danielle F. Wozniak, eds., *Consuming Motherhood* (Rutgers University : New Brunswick, New Jersey, 2004), 19-29.

³⁹³ De Marneffe, 34-35.

³⁹⁴ *ibid*, 11-12.

The other problem area for feminism and motherhood is in the arena of politics, specifically political activism. Motherhood is at the forefront of many social movements, particularly those advocating peace, and there is a tendency for these anti-war movements, often headed by women, to be encapsulated in terms of motherhood, or “the rationality of care.” These women use motherhood as a powerful symbol of resistance and couch their rhetoric in caring terms. This is problematic not for those protesting mothers that truly view women and mothers as more peaceful but rather for those who simply use these terms as a way of getting attention in political protest. Doing so underscores gender differences and causes a continuation of rifts that relegate women to a limited space of protest where dissenting mothers are acceptable but dissenting women are not.³⁹⁵

What often happens between feminism and mothering is that radical and activist mothers do not identify with feminism, while feminism ignores motherhood and mothering as an experience. This creates a “maternal divide” where mothers are activists without the assistance of feminism, and feminism discusses motherhood as an institution and how it can be morphed into a political catalyst while overlooking the fact that for many mothers, mothering is an experience with the potential for significant feminist contributions.³⁹⁶

What is needed, then, is a feminism that includes mothers and mothering as legitimate feminist agents and feminist “motherist” politics that allow activist mothers to

³⁹⁵ Simona Sharoni, “Motherhood and the Politics of Women’s Resistance: Israeli Women Organizing for Peace,” in Alexis Jetter, Annelise Orleck, and Diana Taylor, eds., *The Politics of Motherhood: Activist Voices From Left to Right* (University Press of New England: Hanover, New Hampshire, 1996), 146-147.

³⁹⁶ Marianne Hirsch, “Feminism at the Maternal Divide: A Diary,” in Alexis Jetter, Annelise Orleck, and Diana Taylor, eds., *The Politics of Motherhood: Activist Voices From Left to Right* (University Press of New England: Hanover, New Hampshire, 1996), 352. Ellison also discusses the power of mothers as activists, see pages 215-226.

draw strategies and support from feminism.³⁹⁷ However, the idea of “maternal politics”³⁹⁸ is ardently opposed by many feminists for a number of reasons. Many see the notion as little more than a symptom of the backlash against women because although couched in progressive terms, maternal politics still identifies women in a traditional and stereotypical feminine role. Others see the futility of casting mothers as political activists because maternal politics is ineffectual, unpredictable, and often used for undesirable causes.³⁹⁹ Mothers in Nazi Germany and Klan mothers in the 1920s are cited repeatedly as examples of the dark side of mothers as political agents but now added to this list are “homophobic mothers in the United States” who in addition to those mothers who supported racism and totalitarianism, now advocate “sexual bigotry.”⁴⁰⁰

The concern, it appears, is less about the lack of influence that women congregated as mothers can have, or the problematic essentialist gender roles such a gathering implies, and much more about feminism’s inability to control what these women believe and think. Women acting as mothers in accordance with feminism’s dictates are tolerable, while women acting outside of those dictates are hopelessly deluded agents of evil. In this category, Klan mothers and Feminists for Life would most certainly be in the same group. That one was formed from a deep-seeded hatred of life and the other from the love of it makes no difference when such women fall outside of carefully crafted edicts.

³⁹⁷ *ibid.*, 368.

³⁹⁸ This term comes from Sarah Ruddick’s article “Rethinking ‘Maternal’ Politics,” in Alexis Jetter, Annelise Orleck, and Diana Taylor, eds., *The Politics of Motherhood: Activist Voices From Left to Right* (University Press of New England: Hanover, New Hampshire, 1996).

³⁹⁹ *ibid.*, 369.

⁴⁰⁰ *ibid.*

Nonetheless, there is an intense and continuing debate about motherhood that marks public discussion even outside of feminism. This is often centered on the completely separate realm of “ordinary” mothers and their experiences of actual mothering;⁴⁰¹ a world apart from all the discourse on motherhood, political mothering and activist mothers exchanged by feminist academics. In this realm rages the “mommy wars” or the line that has been drawn between “traditional” and “working” mothers in regard to who has the corner on correct and beneficial childrearing. But what of motherhood as it relates to postfeminism?

Since messiness is an essential element of postfeminism, Patrice DiQuinzio’s argument for a politics of mothering would fit well into the structure of postfeminism. It is essentially a politics that “recognizes the simultaneous impossibility and ideological significance of motherhood.”⁴⁰² It is a middle ground between individualism and essential motherhood that involves overlapping and multiple positions on mothering, what it is and who engages in it, an expanded definition of what constitutes childcare, family and the acceptable outcomes of child rearing, and space for those who do not wish to engage in mothering to do so without stigma.⁴⁰³ Unfortunately, the ambiguity in such a statement is difficult to overlook. In this case it seems more helpful to conclude that since feminism relies greatly on individualism, “motherhood calls for a transformed individuality, an integration of a new relationship and a new role into one’s sense of self.”⁴⁰⁴ What this practically looks like once again requires individual action rather than a collaborative or sisterhood effort. This places it in the realm of postfeminist politics

⁴⁰¹ This concept of ordinary mothers is mentioned briefly in Ruddick’s article.

⁴⁰² DiQuinzio, 247.

⁴⁰³ *ibid*, 248-249.

⁴⁰⁴ de Marneffe, 15.

where individual choice and action is paramount. In fact, the lack of cohesion in postfeminism as well as the state of generational relations is another important aspect of postfeminist discussion.

Generations and Collaboration

In postfeminism, sisterhood has been replaced with “othering” or the constant comparison of not being like another woman or other women. This othering often juxtaposes the modern postfeminist woman who may in fact like cooking or dressing in pink with the second wave feminist who is bent on censoring the display of these harmful and deviant choices.⁴⁰⁵ The policing feminist then becomes the overarching stereotype in popular culture and the second wave feminist someone to be loathed and avoided.⁴⁰⁶ This sort of division was not always as evident in feminism. Second wave feminism stressed the unity of diverse women through “sisterhood,” while third wave and postfeminist thought abandons this idea and concentrates on women’s differences as the basis of activism.⁴⁰⁷ Now within the feminist movement there is tension between older and younger feminists, the frequent use of “we,” and distrust between the national movement and campus groups. All of this leads to a destructive force within feminism that divides women and inhibits cohesive action. Even the wave metaphor is sometimes considered to be a contributing factor to this division because rather than denoting a constant and

⁴⁰⁵ Brunsdon, 113.

⁴⁰⁶ *ibid*, 114.

⁴⁰⁷ Amanda D. Lotz, ‘Communicating Third-Wave Feminism and New Social Movements: Challenges for the Next Century of Feminist Endeavor,’ *Women and Language* (vol. xxvi, no. 1, 2003), 5-6. Lotz asserts that much of this third wave thought was born out of the experience of exclusion familiar to many “women-of-color”.

synchronized movement toward a unified goal it implies the division of age groups and hints at stagnation in the interim.⁴⁰⁸

A commonly claimed dilemma in feminism today is that the term “woman” is no longer the optimal starting point. This is because women are so diverse now that this term simply does not cover the range of concerns they face. It is also because of the apparent fact that “injustice for any disenfranchised populations is, by its nature, a feminist concern.”⁴⁰⁹ Labor issues and racial discrimination are considered to be feminist issues because they too, are undergirded by patriarchal structures.⁴¹⁰ Race, class, gender, and sexual orientation are issues that set up a hierarchy of domination that keep some suppressed and others on top.⁴¹¹ This makes them inexorably tied to feminism and creates a feminism that can no longer be sustained by a sisterhood.

The fact that there has ceased to be a Movement of any kind for women to identify with is seen as part of the reason for the appearance of postfeminism.⁴¹² Another factor is the lack of identity between women. There is no longer a rallying cry around the term “woman” because there are so many different and competing perceptions of what this looks like and what constitutes womanhood. A final contributing factor is the effect of feminism’s critics who have relegated feminism to the realm of the rigid and passé. This is particularly in the minds of young women who see the victim claims of feminism

⁴⁰⁸ Sarah Boonin, “Please- Stop Thinking about Tomorrow: Building a Feminist Movement on College Campuses for Today,” in Rory Dicker and Alison Piepmeier, eds., *Catching a Wave: Reclaiming Feminism for the 21st Century* (Northeastern University Press: Boston, 2003), 148-149.

⁴⁰⁹ Jennifer L. Pozner, 38.

⁴¹⁰ Boonin, 146.

⁴¹¹ bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (South End Press: Boston, 1990), 62.

⁴¹² Dow attributes part of the reason for feminism going ‘post’ to the defeat of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) in 1982. The disappearance of this unifying goal was a setback to a cohesive women’s movement, 91.

as irrelevant and detrimental to the cause of women.⁴¹³ And so now there is postfeminism or “a state in which there is nothing to join and no clear ‘woman’ to be, but in which many of the concerns of actual women about equality, free expression, power, respect, and sexual subjectivity are still present and compelling.”⁴¹⁴ It is necessary now to discuss exactly what postfeminism is, determine whether it is an actual form of feminism or simply antifeminism, and assess its relation to the third wave.

⁴¹³ Janelle Reinelt, ‘States of Play: Feminism, Gender Studies, and Performance,’ *The Scholar and Feminist Online* (issue 2.1, 2003), 3-4.

⁴¹⁴ *ibid*, 4.

Chapter 5: Postfeminist Reality

What is Postfeminism?

Postfeminism has been referred to as “a mediating point between feminisms and anti-feminisms” because it is “the gateway that opens to either end of the spectrum...”⁴¹⁵ On one end of this spectrum postfeminism is seen as a manufactured concept kept afloat by the combined forces of the political right and corporate media. It is a necessary ruse to under-gird corporate advertising efforts.⁴¹⁶ To critics, then, it is a phenomenon made possible in an economically teeming society because with the emphasis on femininity comes the necessity of products to enhance, hone, and display the related features. Consumption of these products in turn requires money and money is readily available in America today.⁴¹⁷ In this view postfeminism essentially comes down to consumerism. Feminist professionals are not very good consumers so they must be swept aside to make room for the “Anglo, rich, nonprofessional, narcissistic, and profoundly materialist” woman who is the postfeminist, the one who stays at home with all her money and buys “stuff.”⁴¹⁸

The consumerist postfeminist is also found outside the world of advertising. The media portray political women in a postfeminist manner, that is, their political activism or desire for life in the public realm are secondary to their private lives as consumers and actors in traditionally cast feminine roles.⁴¹⁹ Postfeminism in all of these portrayals is individualistic, consumerist, and elitist because it determines that any remaining inequity

⁴¹⁵ Hausbeck, 145.

⁴¹⁶ Susan J. Douglas, ‘Manufacturing Postfeminism,’ In *These Times* (May 13, 2002, <http://www.Alternet.org/print.html?StoryID=13118>), 1.

⁴¹⁷ Hausbeck, 160.

⁴¹⁸ Jones, 19.

⁴¹⁹ Vavrus, *Postfeminist News*, 2.

is due to women's failed choices to make it otherwise. From this perspective, the focus of postfeminism is seen as misguided because it concentrates on the benefits of high-dollar commodities and the exclusive experiences of heterosexual, white, middle-class females as being common to all women.⁴²⁰

The other end of the spectrum of postfeminism characteristics represents a shift from discussions about equality to discussions about difference. Rather than being a “depoliticization of feminism” it is “a political shift in feminism’s conceptual and theoretical agenda.”⁴²¹ It is the intersection of postmodernism, post-colonialism, and post-structuralism with feminism and the result is a dynamic movement capable of addressing the feminist concerns of patriarchy and imperialism in a non-hegemonic and fluid manner that allows for the incorporation of previously excluded groups of people.⁴²² Even those who view postfeminism as a depoliticizing agent describe it as an “emerging culture and ideology that simultaneously incorporates, revises, and depoliticizes many of the fundamental issues advanced by second wave feminism.”⁴²³ In fact, it is thought that once the various uses of the term postfeminism are established, it can become “an extremely valuable descriptor for recognizing and analyzing recent shifts in female representations and ideas about feminism...”⁴²⁴

Postfeminism has a number of characterizations, the first of which is in keeping with the idea that the current move is away from sisterhood and toward a complexity of

⁴²⁰ *ibid.*, 23.

⁴²¹ Brooks, 4.

⁴²² *ibid.*

⁴²³ Deborah Rosenfelt and Judith Stacey, “Second Thoughts on the second wave,” in Karen V. Hansen and Ilene J. Philipson, eds., *Women, class, and the feminist imagination: A socialist-feminist reader* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), 549.

⁴²⁴ Amanda D. Lotz, ‘Postfeminist Television Criticism: Rehabilitating Critical Terms and Identifying Postfeminist Attributes,’ *Feminist Media Studies* (vol. 1, no. 1, 2001), 106.

experiences. This characterization involves narratives that “explore the diverse relations to power women inhabit,”⁴²⁵ in essence emphasizing the varied ways that women experience and interact with existing power structures. The resulting diversity of options open to women no longer allows for the uniform female experience that constructed the sisterhood of the second wave.⁴²⁶

The second postfeminist characterization depicts “varied feminist solutions and loose organizations of activism.”⁴²⁷ Because women have such varied relations to powers structures, their activism looks very different as they address inequalities from various positions and angles. A third characterization is the tendency to “deconstruct binary categories of gender and sexuality, instead viewing these categories as flexible and indistinct.”⁴²⁸ In other words, anything goes. This inclusive directive is, of course, contrary to the restricted audience that critics claim postfeminism to have,⁴²⁹ but it is nonetheless a natural consequence of postfeminism’s embrace of both old and new feminist expressions. It is, in essence, a transitional period that represents the restlessness and dissatisfaction of women. Second wave feminism achieved some profound victories but overall, it didn’t work as intended. Women still are not “free:” they have not attained true equality or freedom. They have made strides but come up empty. Postfeminism, then, is a desperate search for solutions and a grasping at straws, some strange and absurd.

⁴²⁵ *ibid*, 115.

⁴²⁶ It is interesting to note Ruth Rosen, *The World Split Open: How the modern women’s movement changed America* (Viking: New York, 2000), chapter 7. Here she discusses the aspect of sisterhood and how it was often fraught with betrayal, envy, strife and a lack of real unity. Oftentimes it was political jargon more than reality.

⁴²⁷ Lotz, *Postfeminist Television Criticism*, 116.

⁴²⁸ *ibid*.

⁴²⁹ See Dow, 169 for a discussion of postfeminism’s influence on the work vs. family dilemma and other topics thought to include only a white, middle-class, married segment of the population.

While postfeminism has several defining characteristics, the crux of postfeminism is about defining equality differently than has been done previously. Equality should not look like androgyny, nor should it be strictly divided by gender. Such divisions reduce humanity to pure biology and miss the human elements of thought, intellect, emotion and expression. Biology is important but not paramount and does little to reflect the true nature of a person. It does not make a lot of sense to claim that women have attained equality when this is gauged through the premise of male achievement. Men and women have similar values and dissimilar values, but these appear to be intertwined among personalities as well as through genders. Some women want careers in medicine and law and so do men. Some men want marriage and family and so do women. If a fulfilled woman working part-time at her law firm in order to be at home with children is not considered equal to a man fulfilled by his full-time career in journalism, then “equality” is meaningless.

Emphasis on the freedom of women to choose careers outside of the home and positive exclamations of the fulfillment this brings is important and valid. What seems lost in all of these discussions, however, is that most working women are not working careers, they are working jobs. It is possible that the woman cleaning the bathroom at the superstore and the female employees at the Exxon station dreamed of entering the workforce in these positions, but it is difficult to imagine. This does not invalidate discussions of career women and the equality they are achieving but it does introduce the question of what equality looks like. If equality is an exciting travel schedule and meetings at posh hotels then most women are in trouble, not only because they do not have any such career options, but because they may not even want them.

Of course there are claims that women fulfilled by traditional feminine occupations are simply deluded by a larger cultural scheme to keep them suppressed. Should this be the case it seems society is similar to George Orwell's *1984* and the few "enlightened" ones will simply have to persist and free these simple, hoodwinked creatures from their caged existences. There is, though, the question of whether one can be duped into contentment. If women in traditional feminine roles are truly contented and not just pretending to be so, is it possible that they and their contributions to society are genuinely equal with those on the frontiers of politics and business? Is it possible that their individual value and worth are separate from whatever it is they are doing and that equality exists through different expressions? If parity and uniformity are one in the same, a closed country governed by a dictatorship seems a far better place to foster equal rights than democratic America.

True equality should not lead to unhappiness and dissatisfaction. If women are unhappy because they have not achieved equality this is perfectly understandable. It is also understandable if women are unhappy at achieving someone else's version of equality. This must lead to the conclusion that a woman who has chosen a career path and is fulfilled by her work has achieved equality as has the woman who is fulfilled by her efforts to raise a family. Women should be able to be equal to men without looking the same. Power, after all, is the common theme in the quest for equal rights and it is sought by different means according to the generation. Where women once proclaimed it through sisterhood and new career frontiers they now rely on individuality and physical desirability, but the goal remains the same.

The essence of postfeminism, then, is to return the idea of feminine equality to reality. There must be synthesis between the dual arenas of work and family because these are important to women. Postfeminism has the capacity to recapture the hijacked notions of love, marriage, family, modesty, and femininity and meld them with the Second wave achievements of career opportunity and broadened horizons. It is not a halt to efforts of attaining equality but it is a recognition that tremendous progress has been made and younger generations of women do not identify with the harsh rhetoric used to break out of the 1950s cult motherhood mold. Women desire education, desire careers, desire marriage, desire children, and desire equality and these are not at odds with each other. In fact, if women are ever to transcend being “woman-focused” and become “human-focused,” these differing desires must be recognized, respected, and integrated into feminine discourse.

Are We in a Postfeminist Era?

While feminist research contradicts postfeminist claims of decreasing support for the women’s movement, increased pockets of antifeminism among particular groups of women, and increased feelings of the irrelevance of feminism, there is evidence of “an ‘I’m not a feminist, but...’ phenomenon” that “seems to suggest a new version of feminism is finding credence among some women.”⁴³⁰ While women by and large support feminist issues, the cohesiveness drops drastically when they are asked whether or not they are feminists⁴³¹ and among those who do claim to be feminists, there is

⁴³⁰ Elaine J. Hall and Marnie Salupo Rodriguez, ‘The Myth of Postfeminism,’ *Gender and Society* (vol, 17 no. 6, December 2003), 898.

⁴³¹ See Mandle pg. 101 for results of a survey that conclude that Colgate students agree with feminist ideals while not wanting to be called feminists. Paula Kamen found similar results in interviews where 46% responded they were not feminists, 13% said were not feminists, but..., and 13% claimed they were feminists, but...(30-31).

commonly a qualifying explanation as to what feminist stances are desirable and undesirable.⁴³²

A survey concluded that women who identified themselves as feminists without any qualifying statements were all white, middle-class college graduates who had developed a feminist consciousness from women's studies courses in college. Those who identified as feminists but qualified the meaning included those from different racial or working-class backgrounds that had also attended college, but did not take any women's studies courses.⁴³³ In fact, education is possibly the strongest determining factor as to whether a woman considers herself a feminist.⁴³⁴ At the same time, another poll found that the slight majority of women feel that feminism is not relevant to women as a whole and more than 70 percent claimed it irrelevant to themselves personally.⁴³⁵

A looming question is entailed in all of these statistics. There is today no large scale women's movement, and many women are loath to label themselves as feminists even when they concur with certain feminist goals. This could certainly be due in part to negative media attention, often to the more fringe elements of the feminist movement. But, it could also have other origins in defining the scope and goals of a feminist movement. An often quoted take on feminism is from poet Katha Pollitt who claims that "for me, to be a feminist is to answer the question 'Are women human?' with a yes."⁴³⁶

⁴³² Aronson, 912.

⁴³³ *ibid.*, 913.

⁴³⁴ This was revealed by a Time/CNN poll. See Bellafante, 58.

⁴³⁵ *ibid.*

⁴³⁶ Katha Pollitt, *Reasonable Creatures: Essays on Women and Feminism* (New York: Vintage, 1995), xxi.

While this is a noble battle cry for feminism as it stands in the new millennium, it is a far cry from the mission statements of feminist groups such as the Feminist Majority Foundation or the assertions of many modern feminist writers and thinkers.

A cry that women are human and as such deserve equal treatment is an all-inclusive statement. It means that every woman can be a feminist. But, there is a closed-door policy in feminism today that prevents it from being effective in any real or practical sense or from appealing to a majority of women. When Nazi women leaders are equated with “backlash conservatives, akin to women in fundamentalist neo-fascist and Christian Right organizations today,”⁴³⁷ there is a ceiling placed on feminist goals. This dictate of who is and is not an acceptable woman is a far cry from Katha Pollitt’s simple feminist definition of classifying women as human. There has ceased to be any real progress made when narrow dictates are implemented and entire groups of women isolated.

In light of feminism’s tendency toward exclusion, postfeminism with its room for varied expression is a natural progression of events in the timeline of women’s struggle for equality. American women are more diverse than ever and have differing and many times opposing views of what equality entails. Therefore, advancement toward any type of social improvement for women is not likely to come through a traditional feminist organization. This is not exactly revolutionary nor is it a dismissal of all feminist goals because much of the work of feminism has been accomplished by men and women independent of the mainstream feminist organizations such as the National Organization for Women (NOW). Unions like the International Union of Electrical Workers and

⁴³⁷ Claudia Koonz, “Motherhood and Politics on the Far Right,” in Alexis Jetter, Annelise Orleck, and Diana Taylor, eds., *The Politics of Motherhood: Activist Voices From Left to Right* (University Press of New England: Hanover, New Hampshire, 1996), 233.

organizations such as the National Council of Churches and the American Civil Liberties Union made great leaps in gaining rights for women, in some cases years prior to the equalization push of the 1960s.⁴³⁸

Even today, the tendency toward multiplicity is changing the way feminism operates. Third wave feminism is not likely to be characterized by a single widely known leader like a Betty Friedan or a Gloria Steinem, but rather to be a composite of a variety of women. This is due to the changing nature of leadership as well as the fact that while the second wave took women out of their lives in order to incorporate them into the movement, the third wave incorporates the movement into the lives of women. When a woman wanted to be a feminist in 1970 she joined a feminist organization or group of some sort. When a woman wants to be a feminist 35 years later she brings feminism to her workplace or other life activities.⁴³⁹ Again, the move is toward varied expressions of feminism that do not signal an end to feminist effort but rather a shift in its mode of operation. The National Organization for Women will continue to operate as will countless other feminist outposts, but a collective sisterhood is simply not feasible unless a collective sisterhood goal can once again be established. While few women are likely to oppose a national effort to institute equal pay for equal work there is little chance that such an effort would be effective when equal pay issues are accompanied by pork barrel, or exclusive definitions of proper feminist beliefs. If equal pay efforts entail also being in

⁴³⁸ Susan M. Hartmann, *The Other Feminists: Activists in the Liberal Establishment* (Yale University Press: New Haven, 1998).

⁴³⁹ Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards, 'Who's the Next Gloria? The Quest for the Third Wave Superleader,' in Rory Dicker and Alison Piepmeier, eds., *Catching a Wave: Reclaiming Feminism for the 21st Century* (Northeastern University Press: Boston, 2003), 159-165.

favor of divisive social issues such as lesbian rights then feminism has failed to accomplish its goal.

Currently, the official top priority issues for NOW are abortion rights/reproductive issues, violence against women, Constitutional equality, promoting diversity/ending racism, lesbian rights, and economic justice.⁴⁴⁰ While some of these issues such as violence against women are likely candidates for a cohesive effort, others are not. Again, this exclusive definition of requirements for feminism is seen in other feminist groups such as the Feminist Majority Foundation (FMF) which is geared toward generating and organizing campus interest in feminism. In deciding the mission statement for campus groups the leaders determined that there are core unalterable beliefs that cannot be compromised and these include “pro-gender equality, pro-choice, pro-LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual, and Transgender) rights, pro-civil rights and affirmative action, pro-environment, pro-nonviolence, anti-discrimination, and pro-labor.”⁴⁴¹

Much of the feminist movement is centered on these and similar exclusive and dogmatic statements of purpose that propose the taking of an unborn baby’s life to be on par with pay equity and nonviolence.⁴⁴² However, such presumptions place feminism squarely in the realm of the irrelevant and offensive for millions of women. If the goal of feminism is to promote a narrow political agenda obsessed far more with stretching the boundaries of traditional morality than equality for all women in a variety of surroundings, it has done an exceptional and unprecedented job. If, however, the goal of feminism is to represent ordinary women in real life and help them and others answer

⁴⁴⁰ <http://www.now.org>, June 6, 2007.

⁴⁴¹ Boonin, 147.

⁴⁴² See Mandle pg. 132 for a summary of the exclusively pro-choice views of feminism.

Katha Pollitt's question in the affirmative, then it has swerved far from its course. A feminism that dictates required beliefs for women to be truly interested in equality does little to affect the spheres where many women live. Postfeminism, then, due to its openness and diversity has become inevitable in the progression of gaining equality for women. With postfeminism, abortion opponents and proponents are under the same umbrella because it extends the dictates of feminism to cover previously excluded ends of the political spectrum. Whether this is a permanent or even entirely desirable state still remains to be seen, but the current era is postfeminist nonetheless.

Feminism or Anti-feminism?

Many feminists, even younger ones touting a refurbished feminism, dismiss the notion of postfeminism as the equivalent of a feminist dirge. For these believers, the introduction of postfeminism means that all feminist ideals of equity and opportunity have been seemingly realized when in reality there are far too many remaining problems in areas such as domestic violence and personal autonomy for feminism to be dismissed.⁴⁴³ In essence, postfeminism cannot be considered until there can be legitimate discussion of post-patriarchy.⁴⁴⁴ Postfeminism is often considered an antifeminist invention; the absorption of feminism into postmodernism labeled as postfeminism,⁴⁴⁵ but really nothing more than veiled hostility to feminism encased in "antifeminist cultural discourses."⁴⁴⁶ To be postfeminist, then, is to be "safely subordinate to the commodity system and to the circulation of normative, heterosexual male desires."⁴⁴⁷

⁴⁴³ Lehrman, 3.

⁴⁴⁴ Siegel, 55.

⁴⁴⁵ Jones, 23.

⁴⁴⁶ *ibid*, 16.

⁴⁴⁷ *ibid*, 18.

It is thought that as the supremacy of the white heterosexual male becomes threatened by cultures of non-white, gay, and feminist men and women the image of the postfeminist woman is all the more vital for a healthy patriarchal system. She is a necessity because as an upper-class, white, postfeminist woman, she reinforces “predictable stereotypes of femininity.”⁴⁴⁸ In fact, the backlash nature of postfeminism is seen by feminists as a concentrated media campaign to discredit feminism and its ideals and goals. In this way, antifeminists clothed as feminists claim the irrelevance of the women’s movement in order to discredit it and foster feelings of antifeminism even among women thereby creating further divisions of race, class, and occupation.⁴⁴⁹

Postfeminism for many feminists is in essence a manufactured notion built with the help of corporate media that must diminish the progress of feminism in order to sell products that women must buy to be feminine. The strategy is to discredit feminism as “irrelevant and even undesirable because it made millions of women unhappy, unfeminine, childless, lonely, and bitter...”⁴⁵⁰ In this view it is a moneymaking industry and little more.⁴⁵¹

Postfeminism, some argue, undermines feminism in two fundamental ways; by dismissing the need or desire for collective action and by refusing to critique or even acknowledge the existence of a patriarchy.⁴⁵² But then, not all women labeled as postfeminist have an aversion to action. The recent increase in right-wing activism by women has also been labeled as a backlash conservative movement (which differs very

⁴⁴⁸ *ibid.*

⁴⁴⁹ Faludi.

⁴⁵⁰ Douglas.

⁴⁵¹ *ibid.*

⁴⁵² Mary Douglas Vavrus, ‘Putting Ally on trial: Contesting postfeminism in popular culture,’ *Women’s Studies in Communication* (Los Angeles, Fall 2000), 29.

little from conventional conservative movements). It is linked with misogyny, xenophobia, and maternal concern by calling for a “social order marked by ethnic solidarity, ‘natural’ gender roles, and an absolutist value system.”⁴⁵³ In essence, postfeminism is often equated with a backlash movement that can include everything from Nazi women⁴⁵⁴ to those advocating traditional forms of marriage. It appears to have become the catchall phrase for anything critical of feminism.

The fact that women are very prominent in the “backlash” movement seems ironically hypocritical to feminists. These women are taking advantage of the opportunities that feminism has won for them while advocating explicitly anti-feminism viewpoints.⁴⁵⁵ However, while this is seemingly hypocritical to feminists, perhaps it is postfeminist. There is the argument that in order for real feminism to be attained, that is, the right for women to choose whatever life path they wish, feminist theory and political policies should be completely reconstituted or even abandoned because the current ones are fraught with abuse and manipulation.⁴⁵⁶ Sometimes what is labeled as the backlash should more appropriately be labeled as postfeminist in order to recognize that while some feminist issues and goals are being questioned, others are being affirmed. In essence, “shifting attitudes toward feminism do not always represent a *rejection* of women’s liberation as much as an *adjustment* to it.”⁴⁵⁷ There is a difference between

⁴⁵³ Koonz, 231.

⁴⁵⁴ See *ibid* for an explanation about the similarities with the current “backlash” movement and the Weimar Republic.

⁴⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 235.

⁴⁵⁶ Klein, *Undressing Feminism*, 174.

⁴⁵⁷ Dow, 87.

postfeminism and the backlash, primarily the latter's refusal to acknowledge the positive aspects of the women's movement.⁴⁵⁸

Where the backlash and postfeminism do agree is the arena of differences, in viewing men and women as fundamentally different. While postfeminism embraces the idea of the humanity of women as overriding any gender differences, it also accepts the notion of fundamental differences based on gender. This leads to a whole host of unpleasant possibilities for feminists including the relegation of women to the home and motherhood because of their innate nurturing desires.⁴⁵⁹ It does not, however, forever solidify postfeminism as an anti-feminist mindset. The significance of these dueling stances is to once again attest to the openness and messiness of postfeminism. The backlash itself is somewhat ambiguous, a faceless enemy of sorts, because while its membership often includes standard participants such as the right wing, some claim its adherents to be far less recognizable. This view claims that even left-wing men are contributors as they "have recolonised [*sic*] women around the fear of the right."⁴⁶⁰

Regardless of the state of the "backlash" it is an ideology separate from postfeminism. The charge continually leveled against postfeminism of a cloaked anti-feminism is simplistic and erroneous. It is a tempting assimilation because it would allow for "a happy denial of postfeminism and a simple dismissal of its charges, its symbolism, its politics," but unfortunately, it is an inaccurate picture.⁴⁶¹ Postfeminism can most accurately be viewed as an amalgamation or the gray area between feminism and anti-

⁴⁵⁸ *ibid.*, 93. See Faludi pg. 400-421 for an argument that a real backlash is being instituted by those in favor of the elimination of abortion rights and the return to the patriarchal family.

⁴⁵⁹ Dow, 94.

⁴⁶⁰ Andrea Dworkin, "Dworkin on Dworkin," in Diane Bell and Renate Klein, eds., *Radically Speaking: Feminism Reclaimed* (Spinfex: Australia, 1996), 207.

⁴⁶¹ Hausbeck, 178.

feminism that is “larger than one or the other and different from both.”⁴⁶² It is larger because it is not feminism as it has been practiced until now, nor is it anti-feminism as in the dismissal of all things feminist. Postfeminism is far too complex to simply be labeled as anti-feminism and dismissed accordingly. Such a dismissal would be more detrimental than helpful to the cause of women because postfeminism represents the attempt of another generation to express its viewpoints. While these may not always be cohesive, understandable, or even desirable they are, nonetheless, valid for those rejecting the extremes of feminism and anti-feminism.

Every wave and era of feminism has been upsetting to the status quo. That women would have the right to vote was virtually unthinkable before the suffrage movement made its debut and won this coveted entitlement. It was also revolutionary to imagine women pregnant and keeping their jobs, applying for credit and leasing their own apartments but now these are not only possibilities but normal and assumed circumstances because of the work of feminism. Now the status quo is once again being challenged, only this time the status quo is feminism. Rather than being anti-feminist, postfeminism it is a natural progression of events that will either achieve greater equality for women or be swept aside by the next wave of thought and ideas.

Postfeminism and the Third Wave

Postfeminism and the third wave are contemporaries in the timeline of feminism, but it has yet to be determined whether they are the same. This is an important position to establish in the quest to define postfeminism because it gives shape and foundation to this somewhat formless concept. While postfeminism has certainly been categorized as being

⁴⁶² *ibid.*

hostile to feminism, its goals and achievements, it has also been labeled as being the movement of a more wild third wave crowd of feminists seeking a new face for feminism.⁴⁶³ There are also those who concede that we are indeed in an era of postfeminism. But, this concession is given in light of the timeline that we are moving toward a third wave of feminism.⁴⁶⁴ This timeline puts third wave feminism as a welcome relief to postfeminism, a reassertion of true feminist ideals in the context of the new millennium and one that is stronger for having survived the current postfeminist blip in feminist history. Postfeminism, then, is “a time when the residue of feminism is still with us in terms of its history and some of its commitments, but without the overarching umbrella of an organized social or political movement at either grassroots or national levels.”⁴⁶⁵

Rebecca Walker, believed to be the first person to coin the phrase “third wave” did so in a 1992 *Ms.* article claiming that she was not a postfeminist, but rather a third wave feminist.⁴⁶⁶ Nonetheless, the third wave and postfeminism share some striking similarities. “Third wave feminism is about embracing individual experience and making personal stories political.”⁴⁶⁷ It is an answer to the political cohesiveness of previous waves of feminism that did not allow for varying and individual experiences among women. It is, in essence, a response by those who felt homogenized in the white, middle-

⁴⁶³ Holmlund, 116, breaks postfeminism into three categories. “Chicks” are the most prevalent postfeminists and seek to undo the gains of feminism by promoting a backlash against strides toward gender equality. Riot Grrrls, are another category of postfeminist that acknowledge the diversity among women and press for a continuation of feminism and its goals. Finally, academics are a smaller group of theorists heavily focused on the postmodern.

⁴⁶⁴ Reinelt, 2.

⁴⁶⁵ *ibid.*, 3.

⁴⁶⁶ Rebecca Walker, ‘Becoming the Third Wave,’ *Ms.* January/February 1992, 39-41.

⁴⁶⁷ Kristina Sheryl Wong, ‘Pranks and Fake Porn: Doing Feminism My Way,’ in Rory Dicker and Alison Piepmeier, eds., *Catching a Wave: Reclaiming Feminism for the 21st Century* (Northeastern University Press: Boston, 2003), 295.

class feminist movement.⁴⁶⁸ In a letter to second wave feminist Katha Pollitt, third wave feminist Jennifer Baumgardner expresses the desires of younger women for more freedom of feminist expression, a cry that sounds a great deal like postfeminism's embrace of individual expression.

Younger women don't reject feminism- as in equality and dignity and civil rights- out of hand. The Betty Friedan stuff makes sense, even to guys (equal pay, job opportunities for women, etc.). The Helen Gurley Brown/Erica Jong stuff makes sense, too- women are allowed to have sex and like it, to have big appetites, to want to do important work, to be neurotic or insecure or want a man for companionship. The feminism that younger women are afraid of, it seems to me, is the feminism that assumes there is one pure way to be and it is anti-capitalist, super-serious, and hostile to bikini waxes and Madonna.⁴⁶⁹

While third wave feminism, like postfeminism, often rejects the narrow and sometimes puritanical views of second wave feminists in order to embrace multiplicity, this can have its dark side. A downfall of the third wave's openness to diversity is the emergence of what has been called the "feminist-free-for-all," or the idea that anyone can be a feminist. This is seen as dangerous because it overlooks the need for feminist politics, which it must embrace in order to be useful and effective. There must be a set of core beliefs and goals in third wave feminism. In essence, feminism must involve action.⁴⁷⁰ And, third wave feminism does involve action, albeit in a different form than the second wave.

Third wave activism is exemplified by the appearance of organizations such as the Third Wave Foundation that promote feminism for teenagers and young women, feminist

⁴⁶⁸ *ibid.*

⁴⁶⁹ Pollitt and Baumgardner, 309-310.

⁴⁷⁰ Dicker and Piepmeier, 17-19. This "free-for-all" is likely what many third wave feminists see as the open door that has allowed postfeminism to fit into the third wave.

books like Susan Faludi's *Backlash* and Naomi Wolf's *The Beauty Myth* that introduced young women to feminism, and magazines such as *Bust* and other 'zines written to counter the older and much more serious *Ms.* in order to cater to the playful nature of modern feminism.⁴⁷¹ These are forms of third wave activism that look different enough from previous modes so as to cause second wave feminists to perceive it as inaction. This is likely because this activism is not part of a cohesive movement, but more of an individual lifestyle activism.⁴⁷² Though slightly more theoretical, "differential consciousness" is an activist strategy proposed by third wavers. It involves adapting to the environment in one's political stance in order for "the individual to be a self-determined site of feminism."⁴⁷³ In practice this type of activism would involve shifting one's tactics, issues and identities according to the situation. One situation may call for a vehement defense of the differences between men and women while another may call for the staunch insistence that none such differences exist.⁴⁷⁴ This activism strategy is a perfect example of the messiness of third wave feminism and the possibly intolerable differences held under one banner.

When describing what feminism needs to be today, feminists claim that it should be "a politicized, activist feminism that is grounded in material realities and the cultural productions of life in the twenty-first century."⁴⁷⁵ In essence, the modern age is in need of

a feminism that is dedicated to a radical, transformative political vision, a feminism that does not shy away from hard work but recognizes that

⁴⁷¹ *ibid.*, 11.

⁴⁷² *ibid.*

⁴⁷³ Lotz, 6.

⁴⁷⁴ *ibid.*

⁴⁷⁵ Dicker and Piepmeier, 5.

changing the world is a difficult and necessary task, a feminism that utilizes the new technologies of the Internet, the playful world of fashion, and the more clear-cut activism of protest marches, a feminism that can engage with issues as diverse as women's sweatshop labor in global factories and violence against women expressed in popular music.⁴⁷⁶

Essentially, pop culture is thought to be the third wave's "weapon of choice" as it continues the battle against patriarchy and attempts "to make good on the promises and rewards that the second wave aimed for."⁴⁷⁷ This mindset of progression appears to be part of the viewpoint of newer generations. It has been shown that younger women, regardless of race or class background, have an optimistic outlook about the increased opportunities of women while still acknowledging both remaining obstacles and the fact that older women struggled to achieve the progress noted.⁴⁷⁸

This mother/daughter relationship of second and third wave feminism has a number of concrete relational examples with several young writers having prominent second wave feminist mothers. Rebecca Walker, who is cited as coining the phrase "third wave," is the daughter of Alice Walker, a second wave feminist. At the same time Katie Roiphe is also a second wave feminist's daughter but she is seen as a postfeminist. While both of these "daughters" have written about feminism and its inherent presence in their lives, what seems to separate them is the mode of feminism they advocate. Roiphe's feminism is individualistic, a separation from the second wave while Walker's is more communal and tends to see feminism today as having a different face but nonetheless

⁴⁷⁶ *ibid.*

⁴⁷⁷ Karras.

⁴⁷⁸ Aronson, 909. Another interesting indication of this optimism is found in statistics such as the one showing that younger stay-at-home mothers tend to be less worried about suffering consequences in the workforce for taking time out. They were raised thinking men and women to be equal and therefore exercise more freedom in such choices than older women, See Bolton, 255.

strong ties to the second wave.⁴⁷⁹ Perhaps, then, Roiphe is considered a postfeminist and Walker a third wave feminist more for their means than their outcome. In other words, the shared theme is the need for a new face on feminism but the question these authors answer differently is how to accomplish this. Does this make third wave feminism and postfeminism bedfellows or antagonists, or can bedfellows also *be* antagonists?

Perhaps the most helpful classification of postfeminism has been to view it as a branch of third wave theory.⁴⁸⁰ In this categorization they are essentially the same and consequently both are often summarily dismissed by feminism as being anti-feminism. This dismissal is the result of a failure to discover what they are truly saying. Often the third wave and thus postfeminism are interpreted according to simplistic versions offered in the mainstream media rather than a thoughtful exploration of contributions to feminism.⁴⁸¹ In reality, however, they offer valuable insight into the thought and feelings of younger women and how they view, ingest, and live out feminism.

While some argue that postfeminism is a theoretical diversion from the feminist struggle for equality,⁴⁸² such a conclusion is a misreading of this phenomenon. Postfeminism is indeed theoretical and viewed independently looks more like a think-tank than an actual movement toward any sort of goal. The mistake made with

⁴⁷⁹ Astrid Henry, 'Feminism's Family Problem: Feminist Generations and the Mother-Daughter trope,' in Rory Dicker and Alison Piepmeier, eds., *Catching a Wave: Reclaiming Feminism for the 21st Century* (Northeastern University Press: Boston, 2003), 226.

⁴⁸⁰ Lotz, *Communicating Third-Wave Feminism*, 3-4. Lotz classifies third wave feminism into the three categories of reactionary, women-of-color, third wave and third world, and postfeminism. Reactionary third wave thought is comprised of critics that tend to lump second wave feminists into a summarily dismissed category and garner much media attention in the process, women-of-color, third wave and third world feminism includes those excluded from second wave sisterhood and postfeminism offers a broad theoretical base that is built on much of what women-of-color added to feminism.

⁴⁸¹ *ibid*, 6. Interestingly, Lotz mentions the authors Paglia, Roiphe and Wolfe in her reactionary third wave section rather than her postfeminist section, (4). This is notable because other feminists name these same authors as postfeminist theorists and lump postfeminism and anti or reactionary feminism together.

⁴⁸² Georgina Murray, 'Agonize, Don't Organize: A Critique of Postfeminism,' *Current Sociology* (vol. 45, no. 2, April 1997), 37.

postfeminism comes when it is viewed independently. In fact, postfeminism and the third wave have too many similarities to be viewed independently of one another. They are intertwined even though they are not exactly the same. Postfeminism is an operating system, the theoretical thrust behind the way a new generation of women operates and thinks. The third wave, however, is the face of feminism. It is the component of this intersection that allows for perceptible movement. While postfeminism is elusive and the third wave movement less so, together they offer a more complete picture of women as they stand at the beginning of the new millennium.

A common and valid complaint against postfeminism is that its lack of cohesive action puts the pressure of attaining equality into the hands of individual women. If a woman works and plans hard enough and has just the right amount of good fortune, equality becomes an attainable measure. Otherwise, equality unrealized is the fault of individual women who could not quite cut it in this competitive realm. While the move in both postfeminism and the third wave is toward individuality in action and expression, postfeminism abandons all pretense of cohesion. The problem, of course, is that women will never be completely established in equality through individualism. The third wave, then, becomes the vehicle for movement toward this end. In keeping with the vehicle analogy, postfeminism appears to be steering while the third wave is driving. This is not to imply that the third wave employs traditional second wave tactics of protest and action, but in its own modern and pop culture manner, the third wave remains a feminist voice in the current generation.

Are postfeminism and the third wave the same? No, but almost. They are bedfellows to be certain, not only in the sense of timing but also in similar viewpoints on

multiplicity and reliance on popular culture. But, bedfellows can also be antagonists and this describes the relationship as well. While multiplicity is indeed a prized value in both the third wave and postfeminism, it appears to be more emphasized in postfeminism. The “feminist free-for-all” that disturbs some third wave feminists is natural and welcome in postfeminism. This naturally leads to completely contradicting perspectives and positions under one umbrella. Harmony between such competing viewpoints may not even be possible but postfeminism is not hindered by this prospect because its lack of cohesive action renders agreement unnecessary. The essence of both postfeminism and the third wave is a similar shift in thinking. How these two perspectives implement their changes makes them dissimilar. Feminism today can best be described as the intersection and connection of the third wave and postfeminism.

Chapter 6: The Significance of Postfeminism

Political Implications

The implications of an era of postfeminism are numerous and varied. It not only involves a subtle but steady shift in mindset but also in action, the way women operate and live out their lives. This is already being seen clearly in the political arena. Even as postfeminism opens up a range of possibilities and options by incorporating a theme of messiness and contradiction, it has meant a rightward shift in thinking. This subtle shift has been taking place since the early 1980s and the onset of the Reagan era, but it continues today. For instance, it is no longer strange to hear talk of “family values,” and while this is considered by many feminists to be evidence of the severity of a backlash it is nonetheless political jargon that has been adapted by all segments of the political spectrum. Family values are a topic of political conversation because they matter to American constituencies. In keeping with the current postfeminist trend, there is a full circle in motion; a voluntary, self-determined and ultimately arbitrary return to more traditional discussions of family. Also in keeping with postfeminism, and why it differs from pre-feminism, is that these discussions are now carried out in the midst of a political atmosphere that embraces the non-traditional and non-traditionalists as well. It is messy, contradictory, and very postfeminist.

This postfeminist era is likely to foster an increase in women in political roles as current feminist political leaders are joined by women with non-feminist views. This does not indicate a void of female participation on the left end of the political spectrum, but the small number of women on the right and in the middle will likely be increased as a matter of progression into postfeminism. The addition of these women will be a test for

postfeminism, because while it claims to embrace all choices as being acceptable when they are advocated by individual women, this will also involve shifting ground in customary and staunchly held feminist rights. The transition will be played out no more dramatically than on the “sacred” ground of abortion.

Today some say the epitome of a backlash, antifeminist, patriarchal, misogynistic viewpoint can be found within the ranks of pro-life (anti-choice) advocates. It is the ultimate crime against women’s rights to be against abortion. One, in fact, cannot be a feminist without being pro-choice and this is evidenced by virtually all feminist writing and thought. The problem, of course, is that millions of women, even some who embrace other feminist values are not pro-choice. In an era of sisterhood and unquestioned adherence to a scripted code of feminist conduct this fact was secondary and unimportant. However, in an age of postfeminism, where the rule of law is individual expression and multiplicity of experience and behavior, this becomes a paramount division that can no longer be ignored. There must be room for this articulation despite the fact that its opposite is seen as the bedrock of women’s rights. In postfeminism, the foundation is one of varied perspective rather than a dictated stance toward an issue, in this case abortion. While this is certain to be unwelcome in many circles, it is nonetheless a by-product of postfeminism.

The overarching and most profound political implication of postfeminism will be increased diversity of viewpoints. This is due in part to the very nature of postfeminism as a reaction to some of feminism’s perceived shortcomings, including its puritanical nature. However, it is also directly related to the umbrella effect of this wave of thinking. Postfeminism stretches the boundaries of what is acceptable for women in belief and

behavior. It encompasses and legitimizes a greater length of the political spectrum than previous ideologies simply from the fact that the traditional is now accepted along with the non-traditional that has been the hallmark of feminism. While this is a plausible reconciliation for a theoretical undertaking such as postfeminism, it is not likely to be a straightforward, tranquil or even achievable melding of ideologies in any practical sense. The political landscape at the beginning of the millennium is one of harsh dividing lines, radically opposed groups and increasing demarcations. As the case of abortion highlights, this trend is not only a partial result of an era of postfeminism, but it is one likely to continue and increase.

Social Implications

The social implications of postfeminism are varied and reflect the oversights of feminism to which it is a response. The first, and often most vehement is in the women-as-victims arena where postfeminism dons a shorter skirt and screams in rage at the suggestion. Power, the prized commodity of gender relations, is sought differently in a postfeminist era because women see its possession as directly oppositional to victimhood. Therefore, women in a postfeminism era assert their power in oddly contradicting ways. If second wave feminists reacted to societal requirements for feminine beauty postfeminism embraces them. If the second wave sought to free women's sexuality from preconceived and expected notions of behavior, postfeminism attempts to capitalize on the power of femininity in order to permanently establish women as non-victims.

Women are powerful in their sexuality and this is expressed in a number of ways. In popular culture it is through the portrayal of strong and sexy women, in advertising it is through the use of revealing fashion and bold cosmetics, but neither of these repel

criticism that postfeminism is a commercial endeavor or a manufactured concept. However, these expressions do serve to reiterate the solid connection between postfeminism and popular culture as postfeminist perceptions often reflect the larger culture. Modern culture places its highest value on the outward appearance of women so in keeping with this pricing system, beauty and youth are directly related to the possession of power. One cannot help but wonder how this view of sexual power will be readapted when the young women asserting it enter old age, but this is nonetheless a current and prominent mode of thinking. Women accentuate rather than bury their femininity as a way of asserting power and controlling interactions with men.

The social implications of this approach are mixed. There is certainly freedom in a postfeminist era for women to express themselves as they desire and to do this while fulfilling an equally desired role in life. However, it does have other implications about the objectification of the female body and the reduction of female value to biology. Feminism never solved this problem although it has been attempted through both the exposure of the body in protesting venues as well as concealment of the body through masculine trends in fashion and appearance. What has persisted through all of this is that most men enjoy looking at women. But, whether it is in any way helpful to make this goal easier for them by leaving less to guess is certainly up for debate. It also inevitably leads to the irksome question of why women who are now powerfully displaying their bodies are still not safe from sexual harassment or other types of sex crimes.

Postfeminism's response to the victim mentality of feminism is understandable and even laudable to a certain degree. There is, however, something disturbing about a tendency to dismiss or overlook the real trials of women in culture and society. The

desire to uncover some of the more absurd elements of feminism where virtually every undesirable encounter with the opposite sex constitutes sexual harassment or some other form of oppression needs to be balanced against the recognition that women have and should have the right to limit such contacts. There is something misogynistic about an attempt to "let boys be boys" and vilify women for being offended by certain treatment. It is nothing more than an attempt to crush the feminine when women are told to relax and not take it personally when they are harangued by sexual advances and comments. The bottom line is that women have different standards and expectations of gender interaction than men. This is not only acceptable and legitimate, but to indicate that both genders should react to interactions in an identical manner is to once again force an odd and illusory form of androgyny.

Postfeminism's critique of the victim mentality of feminism is a sound argument to a certain degree but it walks the fine line of defining women in terms of the masculine rather than the feminine. Certainly a man and a woman might come away from an interaction with differing interpretations but this is normal and should not require women to attempt to be more masculine in their construal. Historically "feminine nature" has not been well regarded. It is seen as more nurturing, but weak; more understanding, but vacillating; more intuitive, but overly emotional. To dismiss a woman's desire to be treated in a certain manner as nothing more than a victim identity is to reinforce stereotypes and order the masculine as more legitimate than the feminine.

Even this, however, does not display the entire picture. The sexual revolution changed the rules of gender interaction. Feminism attempted to level the sexual playing field by allowing female sexual behavior to be as brash and seemingly without emotional

attachment as male sexual behavior. The accentuated problem, of course, is that women do not always have the same sexual desires and expectations as men. Ambiguity has begotten ambiguity and now men are quite possibly confused about how to behave toward women who flaunt their sexuality but may not actually want sexual attention. The necessary critique of feminism's reductionism tendencies to control sexual behavior needs to be balanced with an awareness that women are at risk in a society that highly sexualizes the female body but fails to place rigid boundaries on its accessibility. Postfeminism has the potential to do this with its broad array of feminine expressions, but this must be a conscious effort. It would be easier to simply boast and display the power of feminine sexuality than to include as well an assessment of its vulnerability.

Postfeminism indeed asserts the power of women by accentuating femininity but this is not always done through the touting of physical features. And while this embrace of the feminine will lead down the traditional path of sexual difference, it is likely to have varying results. It is possible that the journey down this path, unfettered by many once existent inequalities, will uncover old elements of difference which once thought oppressive, are now keys to sexual equality. In keeping with the contradicting nature of postfeminism, there is one such social trend in progress that employs methods distinct from other means of securing sexual freedom, but still asserts the equality of women. This trend is toward an embrace of modesty.

The power of modesty lies in the fact that it protects women thereby making them equal to men *as women* rather than as women trying to be men. Womanhood is asserted one way or the other but without the barrier of modesty the result is victimization rather

than strength.⁴⁸³ Equality requires relation above base instinct (i.e. sexual levels) and modesty achieves this by requiring such interaction. Women who employ modesty use it as a means of gaining power because they elevate other features such as personality or intellect above sexual appeal, thereby securing themselves in a position to be viewed by a characteristic other than biology. Some have taken this route to equality because though women were thought to be emancipated when the outdated norms of sexual conduct were abandoned and they were no longer considered property, this has not been the case. In the highly sexualized and boundary void society of today where the female body is prominently and revealingly displayed but there are few limits on its use, women have to prove themselves worthy of respect rather than receiving this civility simply because they are human. This has served to make them property all the more in the sense that men are no longer required to keep a distance; physical, verbal or otherwise.⁴⁸⁴

Tied to this is the reality that until the onset of postfeminism, sexual equality has often been measured in terms of the degree of “no-strings-sex”⁴⁸⁵ or the ability to have and leave as many lovers as one desires without extended physical or emotional requirements of any kind. This would be an accurate measure of equality if “no-strings-sex” were desired equally by women and men; but it is not. Equality, then, must include the desires of both parties or no equality is actually achieved and the “oppressed” is further oppressed. Feminism has not helped women by pretending that the desires of the sexes, sexual and otherwise, are identical. As such, the postfeminist outlook has shifted

⁴⁸³ Shalit, 108

⁴⁸⁴ *ibid*, 46.

⁴⁸⁵ Crittendon, *What Our Mothers Didn't Tell Us*, 38.

toward an embrace of the chosen desires of many women and is acknowledging the importance of family, marriage, and motherhood in the lives of these women.

If postfeminism is truly all-inclusive, it will include a place for modesty and other traditional forms of expression. This includes a similar trend toward purity and abstinence. This movement is best captured by a phenomenon known as the purity ball and its significance is indicated by the global media attention it has received.⁴⁸⁶ These events, now sponsored in 48 states, are an attempt to solidify father-daughter relationships in order to teach pre-teen and adolescent girls that they have value beyond their sexual prowess and that they deserve to be treated as such by all the men in their lives. What has been labeled as repressive and stifling by feminists is nonetheless an undercurrent in society that is reflective of the crisis of women who are no longer protected by a cultural regard for females. Throwing off the shackles of confined womanhood has meant freedom for women in many areas and new bondage in others. Postfeminism's attempt to wade through this cultural morass is once again a messy and contradictory endeavor. It is, however, an implication of the current era where individual expression is given paramount status even when its message is not the cultural norm. These expressions are now accepted rather than disregarded because they embody one legitimate articulation of the concerns of modern women.

Relational Implications

The first relational possibility of postfeminism is related to its renewed emphasis on traditional gender relations. Postfeminism can create a role for men beyond that of the

⁴⁸⁶ Stephen Adams, 'The Purity Ball Phenomenon,' *Citizen Magazine* (vol. 21, no. 6, June 2007), 18. There are different facets of the abstinence movement from conservative groups such as Concerned Women of America that attempt to have abstinence based sex education curriculum adopted by public schools to teen led efforts such as "True Love Waits."

age old oppressor. The previously discussed attention toward the role of men as fathers is an indication that true feminism is not centered solely on women. At its inception feminism was woman-centered out of the necessity of establishing the humanity of the female gender. However, as movement has progressed into an era of postfeminism and a synthesis of old and new, gender relations, including those once thought oppressive are once again pivotal to discussions of equality. Without the incorporation of a space for men in their varying roles as friends, husbands, fathers, brothers, sons and mentors, there has not been a full account of a woman's life. And, there is little hope of the establishment of complete equity or contentment until the desires of women who want to have men in their lives in these assorted roles is acknowledged and legitimized.

Postfeminism allows for this not only in the room it supplies for discussions of fathering, but also of marriage and mothering. In reality, many postfeminist ideals of balancing work and family, or juggling careers and children are simply not possible without the cooperation and support of men. Perhaps some women have the individual means to establish such a truce for themselves, or have the ability to do so with only the help of other females. However, most women realistically rely on men in some capacity to realize and meet the demands of their daily lives. Practically speaking, then, postfeminism's space for men will mean a continuation of the trend in parenting where fathers are increasingly involved with their children on a daily basis. It will also entail an increasing partnership mentality between men and women as conventional gender divisions of labor continue to erode. While this is also a trend that has been evolving in recent years, its acceptance will be accelerated rather than stymied by postfeminism.

Essentially, the inclusion of men into postfeminist discussions has had to come on an individual level because this meets the postfeminist requirement of the personal realization of goals. It also highlights the most disturbing relational implication of postfeminism, which is its abandonment of the need for cooperative efforts on a large scale. However, what has been taken as postfeminism's dismissal of the value of group collaborative efforts may more accurately be described as a cry for the prerogative of choosing one's own group. Postfeminism is not entirely opposed to cohesiveness as long as the group is one that the individual has chosen. What it does oppose is the sisterhood phenomenon of second wave feminism where the values of the group and the subsequent action toward the realization of goals may or may not reflect the desires of the individual. The implications of this value on individualism will mean smaller scale achievements for women in the areas of equality. These may in turn tabulate to large accomplishments when individual successes are combined to change the cultural mindset. However, cohesive action is necessary on some level for anything to be achieved. While this does not need to look like the large scale movement of the previous generation in order to be effective, it will nonetheless involve cooperation and collaboration between women and particularly between women and men.

Politics

Politics as a means of achieving goals through the implementation of change in public and governmental policy has been practiced with varying intensity throughout the eras of feminism. Politics has been central to many feminist accomplishments because it often involves lobbying government institutions and key governmental leaders in order to maximize the scope of change. Such changes have been large-scale and far-reaching

since the intent of a policy change is to regulate and steer the behavior of substantial segments of the population. Politics, however, has not been feminism's only means of addressing inequality. Personal behavior has become increasingly emphasized throughout the waves of feminism as a means of altering attitudes and lifestyles. While personal behavior is simply the modification of personal actions and choices rather than the wide-scale transformation of public policy, it is nonetheless a method employed to influence a smaller environment toward feminist goals.

Each era of feminism has used these two methods differently because of the varying circumstances in each time period. The first wave of feminism was centered mostly on the suffrage movement and had as its goal the establishment of equal citizenship for women. This wave benefited from an existing infrastructure of organized grassroots collaboration because it grew out of the Abolition and Temperance movements that employed similar techniques. It also had the benefit of a unifying goal in the right to vote. While personal behavior in the sense of participation in suffrage activities was an obvious part of the first wave, the main emphasis was on politics. The government's unfair policy of exclusion was the focal point of feminist activities. The effect was a slow but steady change in public opinion that culminated in the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment.

Feminism's second wave was not as clear-cut as the first in either its goals or tactics. The second wave was as much a break from a cultural and social mindset as from political conditions. It sought to free women from long unquestioned subordination in everything from economics to sexual behavior and did so in a variety of ways. Second wave tactics of change were an interesting mixture of politics and personal behavior best

summarized in the phrase “the personal is political.” So, while marches, protests and lobbying efforts were common political fare for feminism in this era, so were personal statements such as the pursuit of an ambitious career or the refusal of marriage. However, even in this era of elevating the personal to the political, it was done in the context of collaboration. There was an overarching “sisterhood”-type mentality that solidified the group in question. Women might be establishing feminism in a variety of ways but it was all for the sake of women. “Sisters” were the ones benefiting from either personal sacrifices and choices or political involvement. The results were seen in both the political and social realms as women gained rights on paper as well as in the cultural mindset. The classification of “sex” was added to the 1964 Civil Rights Act at the same time that women were no longer expected to be content with keeping house and hosting dinner parties. It was an era of rapid change that forever altered the landscape of American politics and society.

What makes the second wave even more significant is its initiation of a subsequent era of feminism that rejects many of its methods while continuing to embrace just as many of its goals. The third wave is the next point along feminism’s slow progression along a scale from emphasizing politics to emphasizing personal behavior. While the second wave was a fairly balanced mixture of these methods, the third wave is similarly a mixture but with different proportions. There is no third wave manual for social action, no overarching movement to advocate and no sisterhood to champion. The mixture has become far less about politics and far more about personal behavior. The third wave has types of political action in the form of books, magazines and organizations, but even these employ popular culture to a degree that was unthinkable at

the height of the second wave. Individual behavior has become the primary mode of feminism in this generation and it has replaced much of the previous emphasis on traditional political activism.

This shift, while sometimes interpreted as disillusionment with second wave shortcomings may also be due to its successes. Many of the political goals of feminism were reached during the second wave leaving younger generations to concentrate on different spheres. If the political environment has become notably more woman friendly than pre-feminist days, perhaps third wave feminists see the cultural sphere as the next unmarked territory. The paramount goal is still equality for women but now a host of previously disregarded means are embraced as a way of achieving it. Femininity, now often enhanced and displayed because it is considered a powerful source of freedom, is a primary example of this. Overall, third wave feminism's relatively short life-span renders it difficult to assess for long-term achievements. Its main contribution so far, however, has been an attempt to revamp and revitalize feminism in order to increase its appeal for younger generations.

Just as each wave of feminism has presented a new mixture of political and personal behavior, postfeminism has invented its own version by virtually eradicating any form of traditional political activism. This is where the third wave and postfeminism part company. The third wave, while leaning heavily toward individual and personal expression nonetheless engages in its version of political activism, working toward an established set of goals. This is not so in postfeminism because its postmodern roots render large-scale collective action toward a unified goal impossible. Such collaborative settings simply cannot exist because no one set of political beliefs or ideology is

considered more desirable than another. In other words, there is no “correct” way of thinking, no “truth” to uncover and therefore no “proper” direction to head. There are of course groups within postfeminism that tout certain ideologies and organize accordingly, but to be truly postfeminist requires the ability to equally embrace other viewpoints.

This leads to the most looming question of postfeminism and its politics, which is whether the tent is big enough. In other words, since postfeminism extends in every direction to include ideologies, viewpoints and beliefs from every facet of the political spectrum the inevitable question becomes whether it is possible to house such variations under one umbrella. To be a true postfeminist is to wholeheartedly accept one’s personal viewpoints as well as those of everyone else. There are no absolutes, there is no objective truth, so personal beliefs and practices are seemingly adequate options among many rather than foundationally correct measures of behavior. It remains to be seen how many people have the capacity to be actual postfeminists where they are willing and able to embrace all life choices and each individual code of conduct as equally viable to the one they have chosen.

Another unavoidable question of postfeminism is how big the postfeminist umbrella can get without ceasing to be an umbrella. The inevitable picture is one of a postfeminist tug-of-war as opposing groups pull against one another to achieve their desired aims. This is no different than what currently happens in the political arena, but now these groups may well fall under the same postfeminist umbrella. The question again, however, is what constitutes entrance into postfeminism. While the definition of who can be included is far more comprehensive than feminism, boundaries must still

inevitably be drawn within postfeminism before the concept becomes completely meaningless.

Much of postfeminism's usefulness comes from its broad appeal on a human level, or rather its progression from woman-centered to people-centered theory. However, the foundational premise of postfeminism is still a shared desire for gender equality. Gender equality, while achieved differently by every group within postfeminism, is nonetheless a progression toward recognition of the respect, dignity, worth and value due individuals regardless of their gender. It is essentially movement in the direction of eliminating existing hierarchical structures of gender that value one above the other, most often the masculine above the feminine. What is unique about postfeminism is how this is achieved with its politics of non-politics.

Since postfeminism as a whole relies almost entirely on personal behavior in the accomplishment of goals rather than cohesive political action, the landscape of this era becomes almost prehistoric in a survival-of-the-fittest manner. While postfeminist ideology prohibits the elevation of one viewpoint above another, it seems this ambiguity will inevitably solve itself as one ideology gains more support than another.

Postfeminism, for all its messy vagueness, is still perhaps the most purely democratic form of equality achievement possible. It allows room for an entire spectrum of ideologies and in the truest laissez-faire style leaves these contenders to naturally compete with one another. Groups all along the postfeminist spectrum have the equal opportunity of garnering support enough to make them the majority opinion. So while postfeminism is a seeming non-movement that employs non-politics, it is not without the means to change the landscape of American politics.

Conclusion

Regardless of questions and possibilities raised by postfeminism, it has made concrete contributions in the fact that it has opened up the feminist arena. Even the presence of men in discussions of female equality is representative of postfeminism's most important shift in thinking. It is a subtle and slow but nonetheless vital move toward such negotiations being person-centered rather than woman-centered and raises the stakes from biology to humanity. In essence, women are above all, human and while conversations about femininity and gender will always be important, they should not be the goal. Rather, they open the door to understanding women as human beings, equal, different and separate from men, but essentially of the same human components. This is the pinnacle of feminism in any era because it truly places women in the realm of absolute and unquestioned equality. It is from this platform that the uniqueness of male and female can then be acknowledged, appreciated and even cherished because it no longer places the genders on a hierarchical scale. Postfeminism has certainly not yet accomplished this realization, nor is it a guarantee that it is the final vehicle that will do so. However, it is an agent, for the moment, which is moving society in this direction.

While postfeminism presents a series of unpleasant realities in its acceptance of sometimes clashing viewpoints, it does so with the understanding that these portray the most accurate picture of American women. True freedom, in this perspective is the right to expression regardless of the perspective coloring such a stance. This is helpful in restoring notions lost in the frenzied breakout era of the previous generation, but whether it is helpful in maintaining a progressive push toward solidifying a desirable place for women still remains to be seen. The contribution of postfeminism is useful in its

inclusion of a younger generation that must live with the legacy, both positive and negative, of feminism. If for no other reason the contents of this concept must be considered. It does, however, have legitimizing attributes beyond this that make it a viable compass for the direction of American politics and culture. Like its predecessors, it is an imperfect attempt to assess and remedy the situation of women, but it is also a meaningful and legitimate movement in this direction. It moves in this direction by making room for multiple and varied expressions but only time will prove whether multiplicity has the capacity to remain or if certain ideologies will inevitably offer more appeal to the population and become majority opinion.

The goal of this project has been the establishment of the meaning and definition of postfeminism along with an assessment of whether it accurately represents the current era of thinking. Postfeminism is in essence a collective ideology that pursues gender equality in a variety of manners including an emphasis on individual behavior and diversity, a rejection of victimhood and other perceived feminist shortcomings, and an embrace of femininity and previously discarded feminine interests, within an environment of “anything goes.” It was also concluded that the current era does indeed reflect postfeminist tendencies in its wide-ranging and diversified collection of ideologies and viewpoints that embrace many traditionally feminist stances while shying away from feminism itself.

The progression toward these conclusions was started in Chapter 1 by outlining the waves of feminism and the strands of thought within these eras. It was followed in Chapter 2 by a discussion of third wave feminism, modern feminism and generational differences between the waves. Chapter 3 started the discussion of postfeminism where

the meaning of “post” was explored along with postfeminism’s strong ties to popular culture. It ended with a review of the theoretical underpinnings of this concept. The postfeminist issues of victimhood, work, femininity, sexuality, marriage, men, family and generational collaboration were reviewed in Chapter 4. This was followed in Chapter 5 by a determination of the definition of postfeminism, an assessment of whether the current era is postfeminist, a consideration of anti-feminism and a measurement of postfeminism and the third wave. Finally, Chapter 6 has been an estimation of the implications of postfeminism along with a consideration of its politics and possibilities.

Now that a definition of postfeminism has been attempted it is possible to further explore the concept through different means. In future projects it may be possible to employ quantitative means to measure more precisely the specific attitudes and outlooks of women and assess the scope of postfeminist attitudes. This type of undertaking was not possible before exploring the elusive concept of postfeminism but now that its existence and legitimacy have been determined such a project could be beneficial. A study of this scope could possibly assess more specifically the capability of postfeminism in sustaining useful advancements for women in various arenas. Postfeminism, now defined, is a subject capable of adding valuable and constructive scholarship to many areas of academia.

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Vita

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